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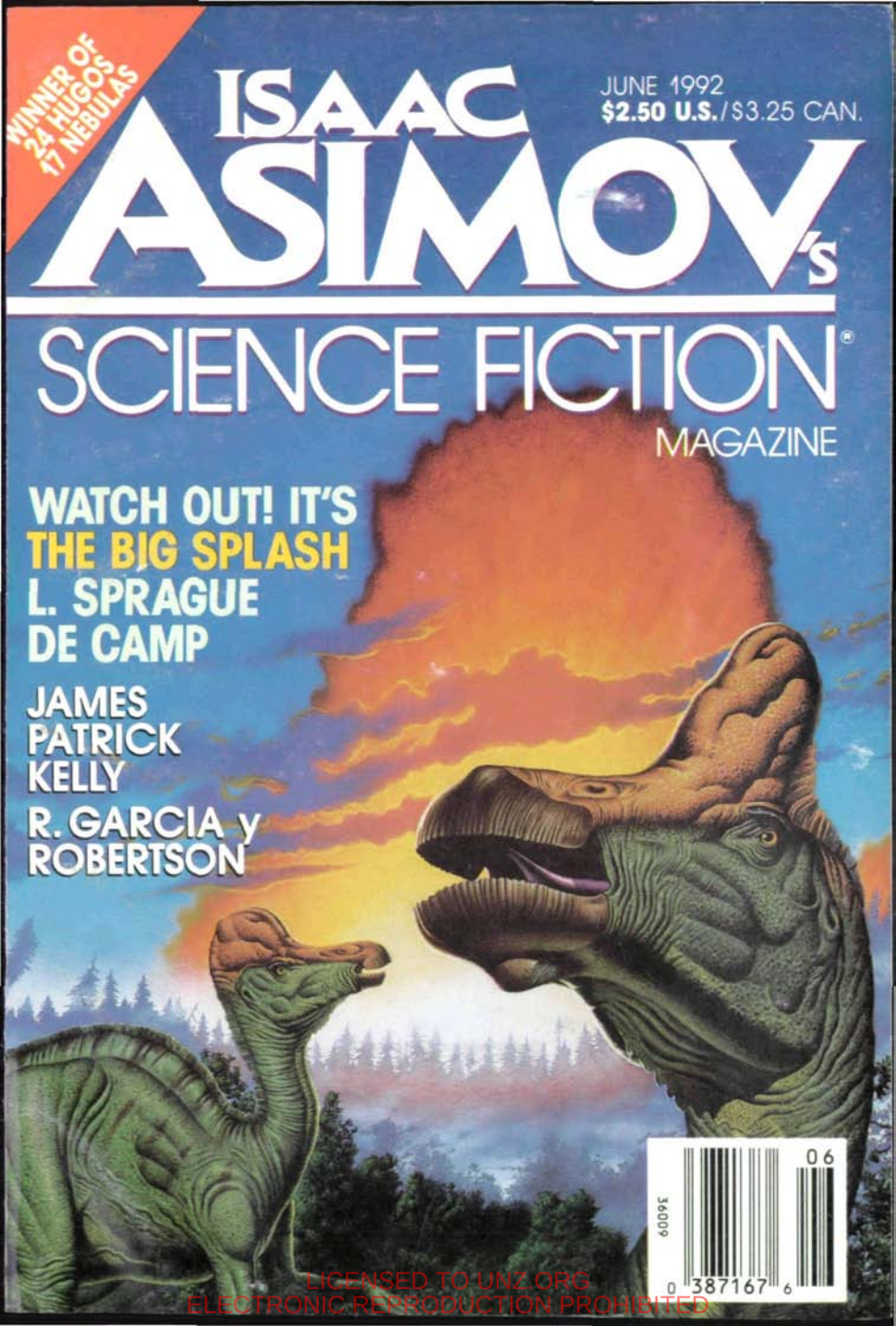

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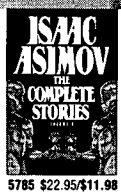

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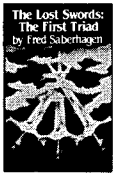

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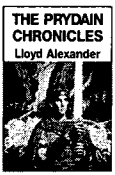

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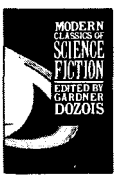

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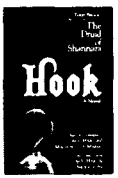

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Stories from *IAsfm* have won seventeen Hugos and seventeen Nebula Awards, and our editors have received seven Hugo Awards for Best Editor. *IAsfm* was also the 1991 recipient of the *Locus* Award for Best Magazine.

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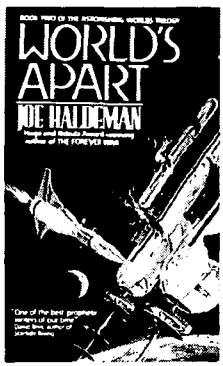

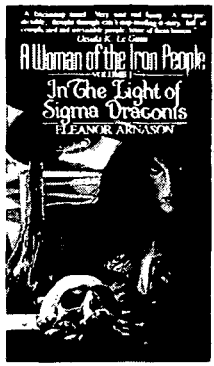

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EDITORIAL

by Isaac Asimov

SPEED

When I was a callow teen-ager, first beginning to write (and very occasionally sell) I wrote as quickly as I could. There were several reasons for this.

1) I had never read a book on how to write (I still haven't). My dear wife, Janet, and I collaborated on a charming book called "How to Enjoy Writing." This, however, is not a book on how to write, but merely an inspirational one intended to make you *want* to write. In any case, I never read a book on how to write and I knew nothing about revisions and polishing and all that sort of stuff. I just poured the stuff out and whatever came out of the typewriter, I submitted.

2) I had to write quickly in any case for at that time I was going to college and working in my father's candystore and the time I had to write was really minimal. Therefore, if I were going to turn out something, it would have to be done quickly.

3) Payment for stories was microscopic in those days and since I needed money for my college tuition, I imagined I had to write many stories so I could sell a few and collect the money.

For all these reasons, I wrote quickly and rarely did any revisions except to correct spelling and grammar. And I managed. That's the marvelous thing of it. And even today I write very quickly.

I know it and so, apparently, does everyone else.

A few years ago, *Time* called me and asked me to write an article for them. You can well imagine this was unusual. *Time* never asked me for an article before and never has since. I was suspicious and said, "Listen, if you want me to write an article it's not because you think I'm such a damn good writer. What you really want is a *fast* article."

And they said, "We have to have it tomorrow."

So I said all right and had a leisurely dinner, then wrote the article and called them to come and collect it the next day. And they did and printed it and paid me.

A similar situation arose when *U.S.A. Today* wanted an article by the next day, but it put me in a quandary. I was about to leave for the theater and so I would have to write it when I came back, and I like my sleep.

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"What do I do?" said I to Janet.

She looked at her watch. "We have three-quarters of an hour before we must leave. Write it now."

So I did (Janet knows me well), and I phoned them and read it to them and then I went off to the theater with a light heart. They printed the article and paid me.

And so it continues. I have written and published 480 books and that can only be done if I write with the speed of lightning and never look back.

I once got roundly scolded for this.

At a convention, a young fellow greeted me and said, "I have been writing science fiction and I've even sold a couple of stories."

"Good," I said, "Keep it up."

He said, "I decided to model myself on you."

"In what way?" I asked.

"Well, I thought I'd do it your way and write very quickly without revisions."

"Did it work?"

"No, it didn't. No matter how I try, the first version is no good. I have to chop and change over and over again."

"Too bad."

"So I checked with other writers I knew to see what I was doing wrong. It turned out that I wasn't doing *anything* wrong. All of them had to chop and change and revise and polish."

"That's a writer's fate," I said.

"But I'll tell you what, Dr. Asimov," he said, "There is something wrong with *you*." And he turned

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and stalked off.

I thought about that for a while and finally decided that there *was* something wrong with me. I wasn't sure what it was. Perhaps it was something called "talent."

Back in 1963, I wrote a history of Greece and handed it in. The editor who, by that time, knew me very well, said, "All right, Isaac, but don't write a history of Rome till we know how Greece is doing."

"Sure," I said amiably.

About a month later, I came into his office and said, "How is Greece doing?"

"Very well," he said.

Whereupon I said, "In that case, here is the history of Rome" and I handed him the manuscript.

That shook him up a little, but he published it and it did reasonably well, too.

It was this same editor who had told me earlier that I wrote too many books. "You're competing with yourself," he said.

I said, "I can't help it. I'd have to write some of the books under a pseudonym and I don't want to do that."

Later, he asked me to write a book and I said, "Won't I be competing with myself?"

And he sighed and said, "That doesn't seem to work with you."

In fact, it worked the other way. Readers became proud of all the books I did and the question I was most often asked was, "How many books have you written?" And I had to keep careful count (which was a pain in the neck) so that I could answer them accurately.

And when the time came when age and illness forced me to slow down my writing to a crawl, a number of them were seriously annoyed.

But books keep appearing, whether I write or not. My good friend, Martin H. Greenberg, once suggested he prepare a complete bibliography of all my books, including paperback versions, foreign translations, everything.

I refused firmly. "Martie," I said, "That would be impossible. There's just too much of everything. Not only would it become your life's work, but if you ever finished, which I strongly doubt, you would end with a voluminous tome that would cost voluminous money. Who the hell would want to buy it?"

Martie registered disappointment and I said, "Why don't you wait till I die. Then you'll at least have a finished oeuvre to work with."

And he said, "Don't kid yourself. Dead or not you will forever have new editions coming out." He was right, of course.

However, I still have one book in the works that I wrote before I got too sick to write. It is my second book of jokes. It is called, *Isaac Asimov Laughs Again* and it has 750 jokes and anecdotes in it.

When I wrote my first book of jokes, I had to be very careful. I couldn't tell funny stories about my first wife and her mother. However, they are both dead now and I

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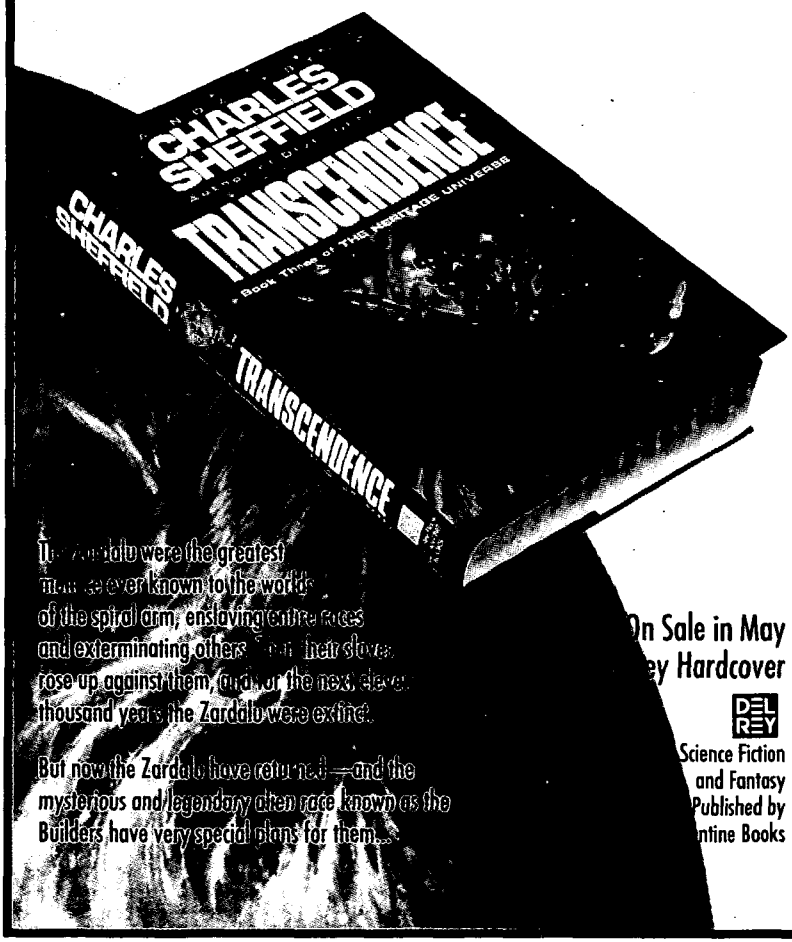

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can say what I please, which is a great relief to me.

Looking back on my life, I can ask myself if I am sorry I wrote so much and so fast. At least, I never really ask myself that but other people sometimes ask me.

The answer is "No." I spent my life doing exactly what I wanted to do and I don't begrudge a minute of it.

Nor do I feel I have missed anything in life.

Janet wonders sometimes why I have never spent any money on luxuries and fripperies since I can well afford them.

"You've been working hard all your life," she tells me, "and you keep accumulating money. What for?"

"So that you and the children can be taken care of after I'm gone."

And she said, "But surely you can spare some money for yourself."

"I would," I said, "if there were anything I wanted. But what do I want? A yacht? A summer home? A trip around the world? Honestly, Janet, the very thought of such things nauseates me. What I want; what I *really* want, is to sit at home at my typewriter or word processor, and that's what I have."

So I live an abstemious life and no one has ever been as happy as I have been.

Of course, now that I scarcely write, my life has changed completely and people ask me how I can stand it. I have always said that I wanted to die in harness, with my face down on my keyboard and my nose stuck between two keys. However, that is not to be and I am unhappy about it.

However, as my darling daughter, Robyn, says, "You have worked without ceasing for over fifty years and you are almost seventy-two now and if anyone ever deserves to retire, it is you. If you feel too tired to work, Dad, then don't work. Remember that I'm on your side."

She's such a good girl. ●

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LETTERS

Dear Mr. Dozois:

Michael Swanwick's writing hardly needs any defense from me, so let me make this a fan letter. I address it to you as a response to Christopher J. Crowley's letter in the October 1991 issue, where he questions the value of *IAsfm* publishing work like Swanwick's *Stations of the Tide*. I loved parts of *Stations* immediately, and have already reread it several times. The narrative and prose styles are so different from other Swanwick work you have published (including *Vacuum Flowers* and *The Dragon Line*) that it is astonishing one author produced them all. And in case it's in question, I liked all of these stories.

I like a range of other work, too, Asimov and Silverberg and Kagan and Sterling and Sheffield and Barrett and dozens of others. In *Stations* we see Swanwick trying out a heavily detailed and character-oriented style, rare in SF, while simultaneously writing spectacularly well (in my humble opinion) about human/computer/cyberspace characters that are new to the field. And he does so without following the cypberpunk formula that bothers some people with its negativity. I don't doubt many people found *Stations* hard to absorb, and I suspect the story suffered some mishaps in editing (certainly the editor's synopsis did not match the division between the two issues). I'm not sure it all "worked," but it came close enough that I have recommended this story to many people, and described it to many others. I would suggest to Mr. Crowley that he has read a story that will contribute literary elements to other authors' works for years to come. No doubt some of those new works will be written in the lengths and styles he prefers, and perhaps some even by Mr. Swanwick.

IAsfm has become a source of a wide variety of speculative fiction, in both form and content. For my vote, please keep it that way!

Sincerely,

Joshua Stern
Los Angeles, CA

That is the important part of a magazine—that it offers a wide range of reading materials. We can't be too narrow in our definitions or we risk boring the reader and alienating those who don't particularly want what we consider to be good science fiction.

—Isaac Asimov

Whenever a novel is serialized in IAsfm, *the synopsis is always written by the book's author. Questions*

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about the synopsis for Stations of the Tide *should be directed to Mr. Swanwick.*

—Sheila Williams

Att.: Thankfully, Letters to the Editor
Regarding: Nancy Kress' Story in April 1991 Issue, "Beggars in Spain." Respect and delighted sighs to everyone concerned:

First, thanks for offering such a wide variety of fiction in your magazine. It's hard to pick a favorite, because when I'm reading a story that's all there is at the moment—but this last thoughtful, honest, compassionate gift by Nancy Kress *has* to be a cut even beyond excellence.

There are so many issues I can personally relate to, reading the story was searing and riveting in a healing way. Fiction really reaches me when everything that happens rings so true, everyone responds *so* understandably, that I'm able to see the mistakes in perception yet cannot harshly judge anybody in the story. I come from a dysfunctional family—strong emphasis on superachievement in order to be loved, alcoholism and the belief in victimhood that can teach *par example*. Also, having a visual handicap, I know whereof was spoken when it came to the hostility, bigotry, and lack of grasp of situation *despite* intensive public outreach. But yes, I've also seen open-minded acceptance, readiness to learn, warm enjoyment of me as a person with or without handicap just for who I am—so when in this lovely and loving novella Nancy showed it all "as in a mirror, *clearly*"—I'm still deeply moved. Thank you!!

Thanks also for agreeing to let your magazine be published in braille; that's my favorite format, and to my knowledge this is the only fiction magazine available *in* braille. But give us a decade and a half when/if computer tech slows enough to stabilize and catch up with itself, when we can catch up with *it*. Imagine! Then I may be literate-equal with everybody—print and braille accessible however needed. *A-a-ahh*!! that's what I like about science fiction—it teaches the "looking up" which helps me stay optimistic about what sometimes can still seem to be paralyzing, a sad, bewildering present.

Peggy Walsh
Pittsburgh, PA

As to your wish for a computer that will make both print and braille equally accessible—all I can say is from your mouth to God's ear.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

My misunderstanding of economics some time ago led me to the same conclusions reached in your recent editorial "The Dismal Science." Seems to me that as we revel in new found patriotism, most of us have failed to notice that the Emperor has no clothes and we really have not won a war, or made any progress in all those vital areas you so succinctly describe. So, while you expect numerous letters from readers telling you you are wrong (though I suspect among your readers you have more sup-

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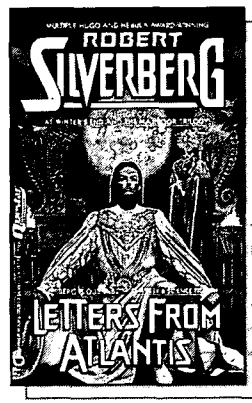

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...And when you see me around, inquire about the classic SF setting in which we all may find ourselves placed at some time in the future. (For previews and riverboat tickets, just ask Philip José Farmer.)

ALSO THIS MONTH:

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port than you imagine), let my letter be one of the few you expect to take your side in this matter.

Furthermore (although I say this half in jest since no one in their right mind would want the responsibility), I think we need a man with your brains in the White House and I wouldn't mind starting a "Draft Asimov" campaign. Perhaps you and Ralph Nader could be co-presidents. And, of course, you'd have to find a place for Harlan Ellison in your cabinet. (How's that for science fiction?)

In conclusion, thanks for many years of good reading and superb insights—the fact that they so often concur with my own does wonders for my ego.

Sincerely,

Sonia Teichert
One Northfield Plaza #505
Northfield, IL 60093

Don't even say the word "president." Even if I were young, strong, vigorous and ambitious (none of which I am) I wouldn't be president for a million bucks. For one thing I would have to give up my writing and to misquote Henry Clay, "I would rather write than be president."

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

After reading the Letters column in my October 1991 issue of *IAsfm*, I did my usual amount of mumbling to myself and then decided it was about time I voiced my opinions.

First, in response to the letter from Christopher Crowley, I too have found some stories wanting. Although some stories (short as well as long) have left me feeling I started reading somewhere in the middle and quit before the end, I assume somebody must understand them or they wouldn't be published. In some cases I have reread a story thinking I must have missed something. In most cases I shrug my shoulders and hope for more stories from Isaac Asimov, Janet Kagan, Anne McCaffrey, etc.

Individual tastes do differ, what I like others may not, so I say—to each his own.

As to the letter written by Allen Duffis, I take exception to his complaint regarding the warnings listed under some book titles in the Science Fiction Book Club ads. He implies that only science fiction books carry these warnings. Obviously he has not read recent ads for other book clubs. If he did, he would find that many book clubs print such warnings. In my opinion, Mr. Duffis misses the whole point. The warnings are merely an informational tool by which readers may choose their reading material. I would think the absence of such warnings would generate more complaints than their inclusion. With the aid of these warnings, readers may choose whether or not they wish to read certain books instead of feeling cheated should they buy a book and find it offensive. Personally, I choose a book by author and premise not by whether or not it carries a warning label.

One last comment before closing. Many times I have read letters complaining of mistakes in scientific facts, grammar, and most re-

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cently foreign language. Although I agree blatant errors can be annoying, I think the letter writers are missing one important fact. Research is essential to the building of a believable story, but what they are reading is science *fiction*. Unlike textbook writers, who must stick to facts, writers of fiction should be allowed to dream. If an author chooses to make an elephant fly and it makes a more interesting story, so what if we all know it is impossible. After all, Dumbo did it. We cannot travel through time either but many an exciting, interesting novel or short story has been written using this premise.

Just because it is *science* fiction doesn't mean we have to say goodbye to our imaginations. Give me an interesting story with a few implausibilities over an unimaginative, completely accurate in every detail work any day. While my attitude may not be what some consider "intellectual," it is more enjoyable than picking apart everything I read.

Sincerely,

Ruth Stavsvick
1542 Chamber St.
St. Paul, MN 55106

I can't say I agree with your last paragraph. Science fiction writers are human (a debatable point, perhaps) and they can make mistakes and errors. But they should make every effort to avoid it. If that requires research, so be it. (Some

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writers take shortcuts. They call me up and ask me and that's all the research they need.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov,

Your October 1991 editorial takes the time to justify your sending postcards in reply to your fan mail, which you regret as being less "respectful" than sending notes inside envelopes. Your concern does you credit, but I think you need no justification. You show more than enough courtesy by mailing on your own budget, to people who neglect enclosing a self-addressed stamped envelope (or stamped postcard) for your use if they expect a reply.

Older fans should know, and newer fans should learn, the economic facts. For many writers and SF clubs, "Enclose SASE for reply" is standard policy—few of them have large postage budgets. It's less of a burden for a fan to pay the postage both ways on one exchange of mail, than for the writer or club to pay postage on thousands of letters per year. In any case, it is a courtesy to the busy person of whom one is asking time and attention, to make the reply easier. Enclosing an SASE also lets the writer spend more time writing stories instead of addressing and stamping envelopes—so it is in the fan's own interest.

C.M. Joserlin

Thank you. I'm glad you're on my side. This sort of letter shows that most readers are gentle and considerate. It's the very few sour apples that spoil everything.

—Isaac Asimov

Dear Dr. Asimov:

I'm a new subscriber, and although I've yet to read the issues I've received cover to cover, I have to admit my favorite section is your Editorial column and "The Dismal Science" in the November issue was OUTSTANDING!!

It was refreshing to see an honorable member of society write such a frank essay on the fall of the American Empire (something I've believed to have been happening for years) instead of avoiding any kind of derogatory statement about the country they live in. Unfortunately, I'm sure many of the people who read your column will find it offensive, as they obviously lack the intelligence needed to see what is so clear. (I often wonder just how hard can it be for them to open their eyes?) Hmmm.

I could be wrong, of course—there's always hope! In any case, I just wanted to mention that there ARE others out there who feel the same way as you. Comforting thought (albeit on a small scale), isn't it? Keep up the great work! I'm looking forward to future columns.

Best regards,

Donna Davis
Chicago, IL

Frankly, I wish I were wrong but I don't think I am. The trouble is that nobody listens.

—Isaac Asimov

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"A feast for the mind and eye."
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THE OCEANS ARE DEAD. THE ANIMALS GONE.

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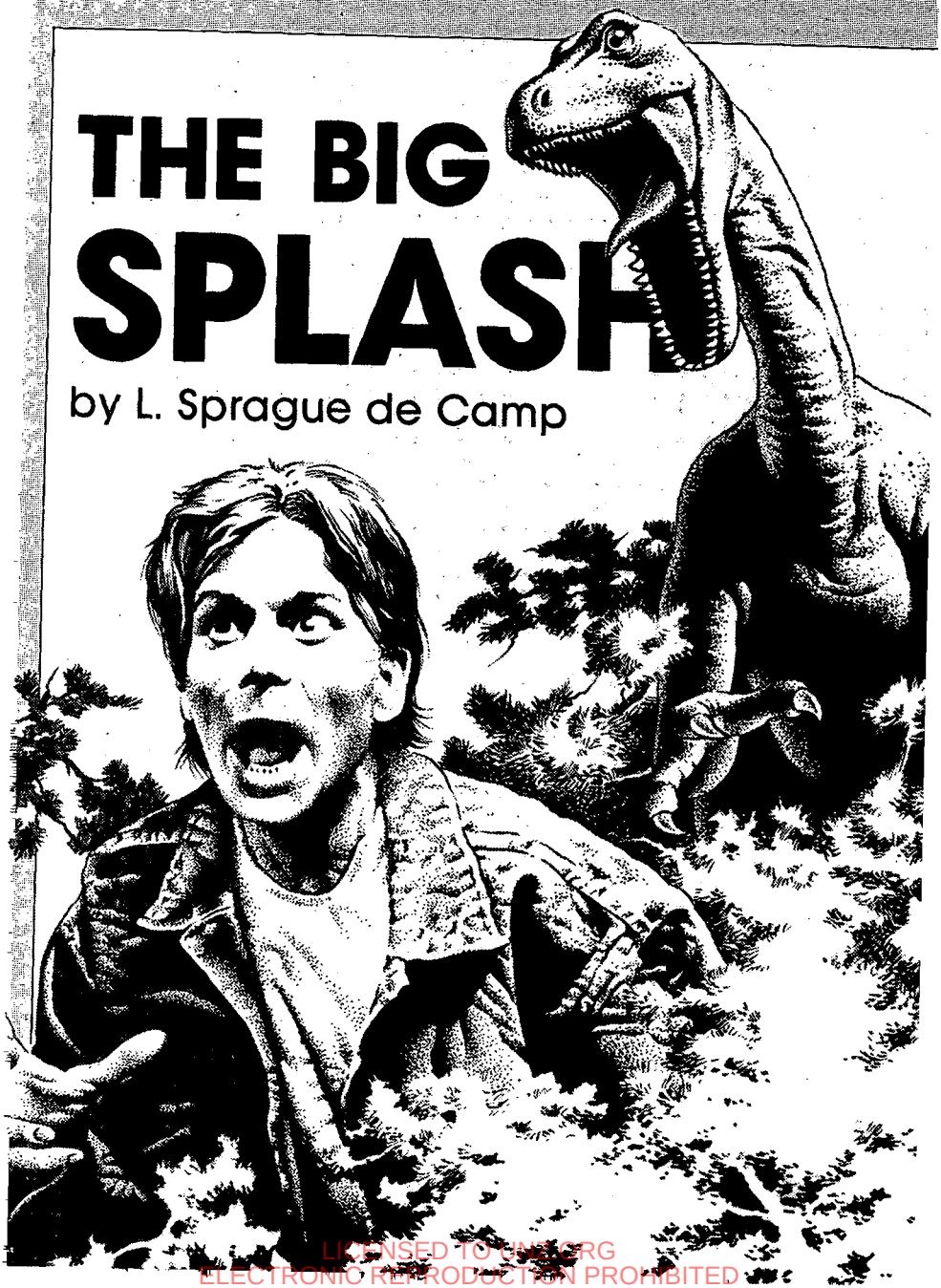
THE BIG SPLASH

by L. Sprague de Camp



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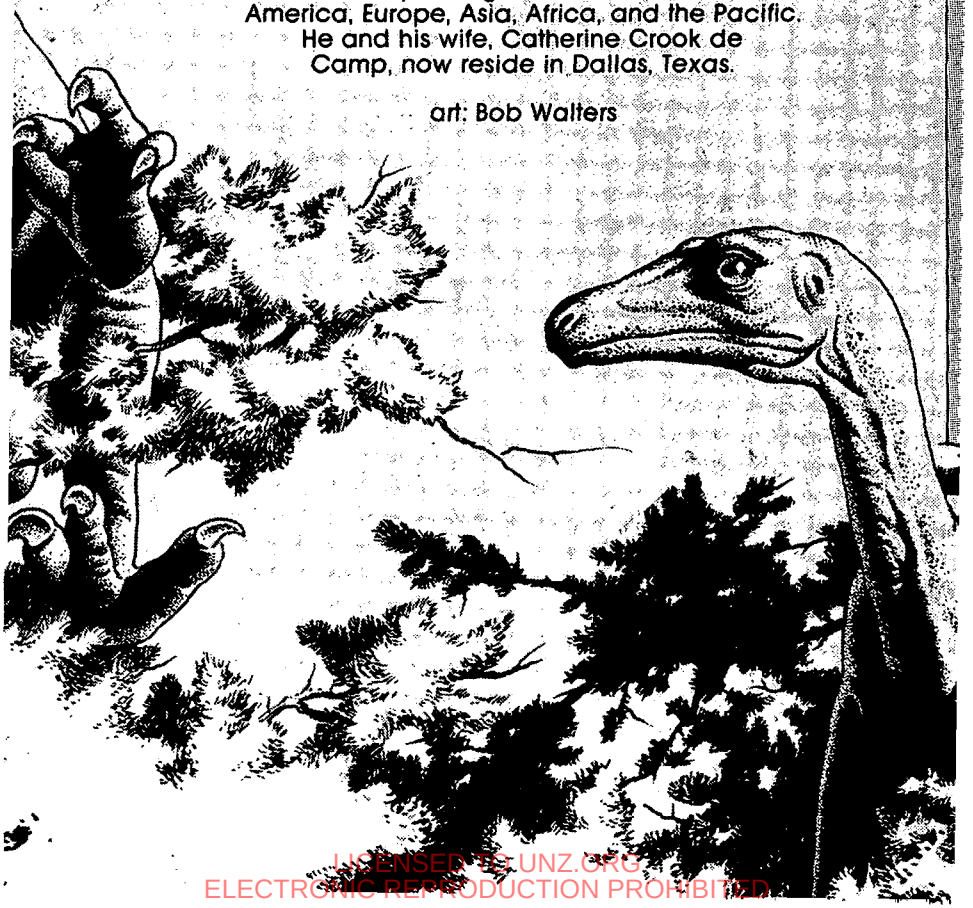
We are pleased to welcome L. Sprague de Camp back to the pages of *IAsfm.* This distinguished science fiction author has pursued the career of a free-lance writer for most of the past sixty years. He is the author or co-author of nearly a hundred books on subjects as varied as science and technology, history, biography, SF, fantasy, and verse. To collect material for his books, Mr. de Camp has traveled widely through North, Central, and South America, Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Pacific. He and his wife, Catherine Crook de Camp, now reside in Dallas, Texas.

art: Bob Walters



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What was my closest call, Mr. Burgess? Let's see. There was the time that drongo Courtney James woke up a sleeping tyrannosaur by shooting a gun over its head. . . . But if you really want to know, on these time safaris we haven't had so much trouble from the animals as from the people, and we haven't had so much grief from the people as we have from natural forces. Like that time we ran into Enyo. No, not Ohio, Enyo. That's what those scientific blokes call the K-T Event. Somebody named it Enyo after some Greek goddess of destruction.

Ta, don't mind if I have another.

The K-T Event? That's what killed off all the dinosaurs, pterosaurs, plesiosaurs, etcetera at the end of the Cretaceous. So Rivers and Aiyar, Time Safaris, took a couple of scientists to the edge of the Event, hoping it would not kill us off along with the ornithopods. And it nearly bloody well did. If Bruce Cohen, the chamber wallah, had been a second sooner or later with the doors, Aljira only knows what—

Who's Aljira? That's the head god of one of the tribes of Abos—excuse me, Native Australians—in the outback. You see, down-under we have lots of wowsers, worse than your Puritans here in America. If they hear you say "By God!" they raise a stink. So I long ago got into the habit of swearing by Aljira to avoid arguments.

But to get back. The scientists had been arguing for half a century over the nature of the K-T Event. Some said a comet or a planetoid hit the Earth; others, that one or more of those big super-volcanoes, like the one that made your Yellowstone Park, cut loose with an eruption that blanketed the Earth with ash and smoke.

When Professor Prochaska, here in St. Louis, got his time chamber working right, and the Raja and I made a going thing of Rivers and Aiyar, a couple of big universities thought to settle the question by sending a pair of their biggest brains back in time for a firsthand look at the Event. One came from Harvard and one from Yale, since no other unis could have afforded the rates.

The man from Harvard was a paleontologist, George Romero of the Museum of Comparative Zoology; a short, plump, middle-aged fellow with sparse gray hair. The other was a geologist, Sterling Featherstone of Yale, a bit younger; a tall, angular, black-haired bloke of the kind they call "raw-boned." Imagine a younger Abraham Lincoln without his whiskers and you've got the idea.

This pair came into the office together and broke the news. I had a pretty full schedule lined up, but in one slot I had only two cash customers ticketed: Clarence Todd, a trophy hunter, and Jon O'Connor, an artist. If you're wondering why an artist should be keen to go back to the Mesozoic—or how an artist could afford the fare—he had a contract with

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that museum in San Francisco to paint Cretaceous scenes from life. They paid his way.

"You understand," said Romero, "that we shall also have to have an astronomer. We need him to keep watching the sky, in hope of calculating when Enyo will hit."

"Who's Enyo?" I said.

"That's our name for the planetoid whose fall caused the K-T Event—"

"He means," said Featherstone, "*if,* as he believes, the Event was the impact of an extraterrestrial body. I'm a supercaldera man myself."

"Has anybody seen this body circling the sun?" I said. "They keep track of a lot of asteroids with their telescopes."

"Of course not!" said Romero. "The impact vaporized it."

"Silly of me. Have you picked your astronomer?"

"Yes," said Romero. "If it's okay with you, it'll be Einar Haupt of Cal Tech."

"I shall want to meet Mr. or Doctor Haupt," I said. "We always like to judge our sahibs before we take them on. A crook choice can cause serious trouble later, as we've found to our sorrow. Right, Raja?"

"Absolutely," said the Raja—that is, Chandra Aiyar. I call him "Raja" because he's actually the hereditary lord of some place in India called Janpur. If he went back there now and tried to assert hereditary claims, the locals would probably throw things at him. I gather the last reigning Raja of Janpur, before the Republic, wasn't universally beloved.

Dr. Haupt turned out to be a big, beefy fellow, almost my size, with red hair and whiskers. He needed the beef to lug his instrument: a super-scientific combination of telescope, transit, and radar set, all over knobs and lenses. By means of the radar he could get a quick reading on the distance of anything this side of Mars.

The first complication popped up when I talked to Beauregard Black, our camp boss, about the trip. The problem was that, since the Event was likely to be a bloody catastrophe for everything around, we had to have the chamber stay with us the whole time we were there leading up to the Event, so we could make a quick getaway. There's no telephone line to Present, so you can ring up and yell:

"Come and get us, quick!"

Bruce Cohen, who ran the chamber, said that that was okay with him as long as he was paid his regular rate. In fact, he said, he was glad of a chance for a good look at one of these primeval landscapes he'd been ferrying people to. So far he'd only had brief glimpses when he opened the chamber doors for the time travelers to hop out and later back in.

When we explained this to Beauregard, he said he had to talk to the rest of the crew, the helpers and herders and Ming the cook. Next day he came back to say in effect: sorry, mate, no dice. The sahibs and I could

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go back and sit on a log to watch the end of the Mesozoic world, but to him and the others that was taking too much of a chance. He said:

"Mr. Rivers, I don't know how fast we'd have to skedaddle; but it would sure be a lot faster than the usual way, with at least two trips in the chamber. With the jacks, it'd take at least three. And we jest ain't gonna stand around watchin' the world go up in smoke waiting for the chamber to come back for the next load."

"We're not taking the asses," I said. "Since we don't know the exact time of the Event, we shan't dare go far enough from the landing site to call for moving the camp. So the crew will be smaller."

Beauregard shook his head. "Jeez, I'm sorry, Mr. Rivers; but I'm afraid we jest ain't gonna. I've talked with the other boys, and we all agree. We got families and that kind of thing."

The Raja and I tried to argue Beauregard round, but we might as well have tried to knock over a mammoth with a flyswatter. I suppose I could have fired him and the others for breach of contract; but I doubted I should ever again find such a bonzer camp boss. We'd been on several *safariin* together, so I knew Beauregard pretty well. Not having our regular helpers would rather leave us up a gum tree. It's not the sort of expedition on which you could rely on casual, untrained help. To push off with such a crew would be asking for disaster.

And so it turned out, when I discussed the problem with our five sahibs. The scientists complained that all the pitching and striking camp, cooking and cleaning up, etcetera, wouldn't leave them time for their scientific work. O'Connor complained that it wouldn't leave him time for his art. But the loudest complaints came from Todd, who was one of these little, Napoleonic types who tries to make up for his physical stature by a prickly, aggressive attitude.

"If this safari doesn't have the things it was advertised as having," he said, "I'm damned if I'll go along on it. I won't be able to get in a decent hunt if I've got to fuck around collecting firewood and all that nonsense. I'll expect my deposit back, too."

Later, when the Raja and I were alone, he said: "I believe I see a way out, Reggie." Back down-under nobody calls me "Reggie." There, it's "Reg." But the Raja had been through one of those English-style educations and picked up some pommy habits. Americans on these jaunts hear him and copy him; so to them I'm "Reggie," too. I don't mind; life is full enough of real problems without stewing over trifles. The Raja explained:

"Suppose Mr. Black and his crew come back to pre-K-T with us, set up camp, and then go back to Present. Then let Mr. Cohen bring the chamber back to pre-K-T and stay there. When time comes to leave, we shan't strike camp in our usual environmentally careful way; just heave the

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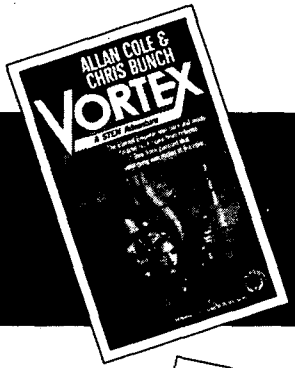
JUNE

SUPER-SPY STEN, A SPELL-WEAVING SLAVE, AND SAVIORS FROM THE STARS—FROM THE FIRST NAME IN IMAGINATION...



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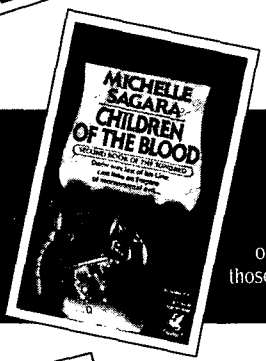

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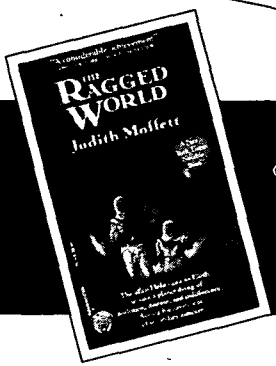

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small, valuable items like guns and instruments into the chamber and leave the tents, camp chairs, and so on where they are. The universities won't like the cost of wasting that stuff, but we shall simply tell them this is the only way the job can be done."

That's how it was decided. The sahibs still grumbled; but their protests were muffled when Ming decided to come along for the whole stretch, so at least they wouldn't have to cook and wash dishes. He explained:

"Mr. Rivers, some day I'll have my own restaurant, and I'll advertise myself as the world's greatest cook for dinosaurs and other extinct animals. You shoot 'em, I'll cook 'em. Besides, I want to try out that new set of kitchen hardware you bought for this time trip."

The first problem, Mr. Burgess, was in setting down the transition chamber at the right time—within a convenient interval before the Event, but not so far ahead that we should grow old while waiting for it. The dating for rocks from the time of the formation had narrowed down the time of the onset of the Event to about a year and a half. They were pretty sure it began in 65,971,453 B.C. or the year following. They couldn't get any closer, and certainly it was bloody marvelous to be able to pin it down to one part in tens of millions.

Neither would it do to overshoot our mark and land in the midst of the Event, which might cause the chamber and us inside it to go *poof*. It would also be unsatisfactory to land after it was over. If that happened, we could witness the aftereffects but we should not be able to tell what caused them. This was, after all, the main purpose of the project.

So we agreed that Cohen should pilot the chamber to somewhere in the low sixty-six millions, and then we should bring it forward in time by jumps of ten years, with Haupt setting up his instrument at each step to try for a dekko at Enyo—that is, assuming this asteroid or comet really existed. As we neared the date of the Event, we should shorten the jumps, first to a month each and then to a day.

The next question was, would the time we chose to settle in provide us with a suitable landing area? The chamber moves back and forth in past time but stays at the same latitude and longitude, and as the centuries fly past the land changes beneath you. For a part of the Cretaceous, the area around St. Louis, Missouri, was under an arm of the Kansas Sea, and the chamber's not equipped for landing in water. At other times, this spot might be the side of a cliff, or a mucky swamp where the passengers couldn't leave the chamber. This chamber has telescoping legs that allow it some latitude in terrain, but only within limits.

Since we couldn't move the chamber horizontally over the Earth's surface, we had to learn what we could from the sites we stopped at, whatever these turned out to be. The scientists—those who believe in an

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extraterrestrial Enyo, that is—had various ideas as to where it hit. The largest vote was for some place in the Caribbean Sea or the adjacent Yucatan peninsula. Others held out for India, and one group argued that the impact had caused the Bering Sea.

There was no sense in fetching the entire crew and equipment back with us each time. Each step required Haupt to sit up all night with his face glued to his eyepiece, while he twiddled knobs and either the Raja or I stood behind him ready to shoot any carnosaur that thought we smelled edible.

As things turned out, no carnosaurs came near us during a couple of score of these all-night vigils. As an astronomer, Haupt was used to these odd sleeping hours; but the Raja and I found them a bit—ah—taxing. We did see a lot of plant eaters, always much the more numerous in any fauna. Mostly smaller species of hypsilophodonts and hadrosaurids, they merely looked us over and waddled away, as if to say they didn't know what sort of creatures we were but didn't care to take chances on us.

I tell you, those months of popping in and out of the late Cretaceous and standing guard over Haupt while he fiddled with his instrument were just plain bloody hard, tedious work. Half the time, when we opened the chamber door, there'd be an overcast or rain. Then we should have to button up the chamber and go on to another day, better for Haupt's seeing.

One night, after his usual hours at the eyepiece, Haupt said: "Don't get your hopes up, Reggie; but I think I may have something."

"You mean you've got this Enyo in your sights at last?"

"It looks that way. Something at about twice lunar distance is headed our way."

"When's it going to hit, and where?" I asked. I'm afraid I let the excitement show in my voice.

"Can't tell yet," said Haupt. "Let me finish my observations. When we get back to Present, I'll have a stack of records for the boys to crunch in their computers. Want a look?"

I looked, but all I could see in the crosshairs was a little spot of light, like another star. "How do you know that's it?" I asked.

"The radar gives the distance, now about eight-hundred-thousand kilometers, and also tells us it's fast approaching. If we had a real star at that distance, we'd all be fried to grease spots in no time."

"Could this be a near miss?"

"I doubt it. Its bearing is close to constant, which means we and it are on a collision course. Even if it's not aimed for a bull's eye, Earth's gravity will partly correct that."

"How soon will it arrive?"

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He shrugged. "Have to let the number-crunchers chew on my results. As a rough guess, I'd say three or four days."

"Stone the crows! That gives us bloody little time to get the reception committee in place. We'd better be off like a bride's nightie to fetch our people, if O'Connor's to have time for his paintings and Todd for his hunt."

I admit that Haupt's words gave me a bit of a shiver. I felt the way a fly must feel when it sees the swatter on its way down, and it's too late to take off—if you can imagine an intelligent fly.

So Bruce Cohen took us back to Present and, yawning from being up all night, I rounded up the gang. When I had explained Haupt's findings, Romero said to Featherstone: "Ha, Sterling! So much for your supercaldera theory!"

"Not at all, George," said Featherstone. "If this thing hit, the impact would send the grandfather of all earthquakes roaring around the globe. Then any supercalderas in a stressed condition might be touched off in eruptions, which otherwise might not happen for thousands of years. A few of those would have a more global effect than just the one impact of Enyo."

"Hm, we shall see," said Romero. "Reggie, how would it be for us to sit out the whole sequence, to try to detect by instrument whether any such eruptions occurred right after the impact?"

"According to what you scientific blokes tell me," I said, "the impact will send out a shock wave that will kill everything bigger than an insect and set fire to anything combustible, at least over the hemisphere in which the impact takes place. If you want to try it, you'll have to sign forms releasing us of any responsibility if we go back to Present leaving you alone with your instruments. Myself, I wouldn't dare try it; my wife would kill me for taking foolish chances."

Beauregard and his boys loaded the equipment into the chamber, and in we piled. O'Connor complained he'd forgot his sheath knife, but we didn't have time for him to go back for it.

The morning after Haupt's all-night vigil that discovered Enyo, Cohen took the whole party back to midday of that same day. I let several hours elapse between the time Haupt and I left the Cretaceous and the time we returned to it, for safety's sake. It wouldn't do to try to occupy the same time slot twice, since that would create a paradox. Can't have that sort of thing in a well-run universe, so the space-time forces snatch you back to Present and blow you to bits in the process.

The place we set down the chamber was about as good as we could

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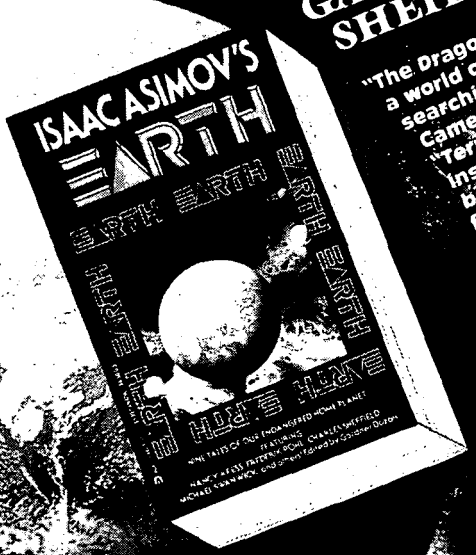

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have asked for. We were on the shoulder of a hill looking off to southeastward. There wasn't much vegetation on the shoulder, just some scrubby cedars and one big tree like the bombax I used to see in India. On the edge of the shoulder and on down the slope grew some stilt-rooted pandanus trees or screw pines. If we cut down a couple of these, we should have a clear view to the south and southeast; in other words, straight at the area where the blokes who favored a Caribbean or Yucatecan impact thought it would fall. On a clear day, Featherstone claimed he could see an arm of the sea on the horizon; but I doubt that. In any case, if the Caribbean bods were right, the thing hit at least two thousand kilometers distant. That was quite close enough for me.

Below the hill, the country was flat and, from what I could see through my glasses, swampy, with a dense forest cover. My American sahibs agreed that the trees were mostly a kind of bald cypress, like the one they knew from their own time.

I ought to know more about such things; but there's a limit to what you can cram into one mind. It's hard enough to master the fauna and flora of one area—say, within a hundred-meter radius of St. Louis—for one geological period. When you try to cover the biotas of a couple of hundred million years, it gets bloody hopeless.

As usual, the Raja and I jumped out of the chamber first, with our big guns ready, in case something hostile were out there to receive us. All we saw was a flock of black-and-white birds, which flew up out of a tree. They looked like normal present-day birds, like your American mockingbird. I couldn't see whether they had teeth in their beaks, as some birds from this time have.

While the crew were setting up the camp, I told O'Connor: "You'd better get on with your painting, Jon. Don't go away from the camp farther than shouting distance—say, fifty meters—and stay in sight."

So off went O'Connor with his load of canvases, paints, and accessories. He was the youngest of our sahibs, with the shaggy-artist look. If he'd been cleaned up and given a proper haircut, he'd have been movie-actor handsome. Otherwise he seemed a mild, obliging sort of young man, if a bit vague about non-artistic matters.

Then up bustled little Mr. Todd, saying: "Look here, Reggie, with so little time, I ought to start my hunt right now."

"Sorry, but we can't," I said. "The Raja and I are tied up with setting up the camp. In an hour or so, one or the other of us ought to be able to take you on a little recco."

"But," says he, "I want to go now, while the daylight lasts! If you can't come along, I'll go by myself!"

"Now, Clarence," I said, "you agreed in writing that you'd follow your guides' orders. It won't kill you to wait a bit. When that Thing gets

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closer, we shall all have to stay close to camp, to be able to board the chamber in seconds."

"You let O'Connor go off by himself!"

"Only to a distance of fifty meters, so we can watch each other. That distance wouldn't do you any good for hunting."

He turned away, grumping, and I went back to siting the tents and the galley. When that was done and the crew were filing back into the chamber, I asked Haupt:

"Is there any indication yet what part of the Earth that Thing will strike?"

"Give me another night, and I can make at least an educated guess. The distance of Enyo and its present velocity, with a correction for the acceleration by the Earth's gravity, will tell us when it will arrive; and knowledge of the time tells us which side of the Earth will be turned toward—"

He and I both jumped at the thunderous bang of Todd's heavy rifle. I looked around the camp but saw no sign of him. I yelled at the Raja:

"Did you see that bloke leave the camp?"

"No," said Aiyar. "I was working with Ming on the supplies."

I was so angry at Todd that I was damned if I'd go crashing off in the outback looking for him, although I had a pretty good idea of where the shot came from. So the Raja and I spent the next half-hour waving off Cohen and the crew in the chamber and getting our sahibs settled.

By then it was near sundown. O'Connor straggled in, loaded with canvases, stands, palette, paints, and a camera. The Raja and I agreed it was time for our evening's spot of lubricant, so I called time. We were sitting round drinking our tot of whiskey. (I'm pretty strict about how much I allow per person. I've seen what can happen when someone goes over his limit on grog.) O'Connor showed off his sketches and talked a streak about *reculement* and other artistic matters that went over my head.

We all turned round as Todd came staggering up the slope. He was covered with blood, and for a bad second I thought he'd lost a chewing contest with a theropod. But he seemed cheerful, with his big-game rifle in one hand and his other arm around his trophy. This was the head of one of the smaller sauropods, the ones that look like a gigantic snake threaded through the body of an elephant. I think this was an *Alamosaurus;* there were still a few sauropods around at the end of the Cretaceous, though nothing like so conspicuous as they were in the late Jurassic. Todd had the head and almost two meters of the animal's neck balanced on his shoulder like a drooping log.

I never advise my sahibs to shoot sauropods. It's not at all sporting, any way you look at it. They're harmless creatures if you leave them

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alone, pretty stupid even by dinosaur standards. I don't mean that dinosaurs are extraordinarily stupid, any more than modern crocs and other reptiles. They have a set of serviceable instincts, which see them through most of the crises of their lives; and they can actually learn, though not so quickly as any mammal.

All the sauropods do, however, is eat, eat, eat anything green they can reach with those long necks. Some are bigger than people thought anything could be and still walk on dry land. But it seems the limiting factor is not the strength of their legs but how much greenery they can gulp down and process in those mighty guts in any one day.

They can survive a lot of gunfire, too. Todd was lucky to have got one in the heart with his first shot. And if you kill one, what have you got? Just that silly little head on that long stalk of a neck.

None of that had stopped Todd. "See?" he said, grinning ear-to-ear. "I got my trophy, and all by myself. Hacked off the head with my machete, and here it is."

"How far down the slope were you when you shot it?" I asked.

He waved. "Maybe two-thirds of the way down, just inside that timberline of bald cypress, where the trees are stunted and scattered."

"And you left the carcass there?"

"Sure! Did you expect me to haul ten tons of dinosaur up that slope? Where's the salt to preserve it with?"

"You bloody idiot!" I said. We get all kinds on these time safaris, but the buggers who cause the most grief are those out to prove their manhood. I went on: "Don't you know the smell will draw carnivorous dinosaurs like flies? They'll be having a grand carrion party before the night is over. That's all right so long as they stay round the carcass; but what's likelier is that a big one will chase off a smaller. Then the smaller, not to be done out of its tucker, will wander up here looking for more—us."

"Scared, eh?" he sneered.

"Why, you ratbag—" I began. Things were making up to a first-class row, when the Raja took hold of Todd's arm and led him aside, saying: "Now look, Mr. Todd, if we start off with a mutiny, we might as well all get back in the chamber and return to Present . . ."

They passed out of my hearing; but the upshot was that Aiyar calmed Todd down to the point where, looking crestfallen, he came back to me and mumbled something about hoping nothing bad would come of his impulsiveness. The Raja found him the preserving materials while Ming got our tea—what you fellows call "dinner."

On a normal time safari, I take the sahibs out on the first full day to hunt fresh meat; that gives us the protein we shall need for scrambling around a rough landscape and also to judge which of the time travelers is to be trusted with a loaded gun. In the Mesozoic, that means one of

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the smaller herbivorous dinosaurs, like a bonehead or a thescelosaur. This time our stay was to be so brief that it didn't seem worthwhile. We had enough food from Present to do us. Besides, Todd seemed the only one keen on hunting.

As I had predicted, the theropods gathered round the carcass of Todd's sauropod down the slope. We could hear their grunts and bellows as they sorted themselves out into a pecking order; but there was so much meat there that they didn't have to compete for it. Anyway, none came up to the shoulder of the hill where we were camped.

When the sun came up next morning, the last of the theropods had gorged itself until it could barely waddle, and little by little they all wandered off into the cypress swamp. Looking through the glasses I could see a set of bare ribs sticking up.

I suggested there was still a fair amount of meat left on the carcass, so we had better keep our guard up against theropod visitors. We don't get the famous *Tyrannosaurus* around our site at this particular time, but those we do get include an *Albertosaurus* big enough to make a snack of you.

Einar Haupt was up most of the night stargazing. After breakfast, he came up with a little pocket-sized computer, saying:

"Reggie, I think I've got Enyo's arrival nailed down. According to my instruments' figures, it'll hit about dawn the day after tomorrow, and pretty certainly on this side of the planet."

"Can you fix the place of impact any closer than that?" I asked.

"Nope. If we were back in Present, my fellow astronomers could dope it out; but we're not."

That gave me an idea of what those blokes must have felt in the two big wars, when they were in a city the enemy was going to bomb. You might comfort yourself with the thought that there was a good chance the bombs wouldn't hit you; but it would be a lot nicer if they didn't fall at all.

"In other words," I said, "we may expect the lady in a little less than two complete revolutions of this bloody planet?"

"That's right." I hadn't said "forty-eight hours" because at that time the Earth rotated a bit faster than it does now, so the hours—I mean the twenty-fourths of one revolution—were shorter. This complicates our efforts to run a safari on schedule, since the sahibs' watches don't conform to the movements of the sun. I've thought of having special watches and clocks made; but the Raja and I decided the expense would be out of proportion to the benefits. Such timepieces would have to be adaptable to the planet's angular velocity for all the times back to the pre-Cambrian.

It was building up to a sticky-hot day. Sterling Featherstone wandered

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by, saying: "Have you seen George around, Reggie? There's a geological question I want to discuss with him."

No, I hadn't seen Romero; and a search of the camp failed to turn him up. Oh, lord, I thought; don't tell me another of these coves has gone walkabout by himself! It wouldn't have much surprised me with O'Connor, who seemed a vague, dreamy sort—but not George Romero, a brisk, no-nonsense field scientist. I once thought scientists of all people were supposed to have better sense, but I find that's not necessarily so.

I made the round of the camp, questioning everyone as to what had become of George Romero. At last Todd told me:

"He said something, half an hour ago, about taking a little walk to watch the local fauna undisturbed by our presence. I'm sure he hasn't gone far."

The Raja saw I was about to blow my top over the matter. He said, "Calm down, Reggie; I'll go hunting for—"

Then a disturbance interrupted. Around the bend of the hill came George Romero, doing a fair turn of speed in spite of being short and middle-aged. Right behind him ran a steno, trying to get close enough to flesh its fangs in his back.

A steno? That's short for *Stenonychosaurus,* one of the saurornithoids of this period. We call them "stenos" because people find *Stenonychosaurus* hard to remember. They're smaller flesh-eaters. One weighs around fifty kilos—in other words, as much as a smallish human being. They have a slim running shape, and when moving they come up about to your navel, with the head and tail sticking out horizontally. When they rear up, they can look you in the eye. They're normally harmless, since their prey is little things like lizards, birds, and the mammals of those times, all of which looked much like rats and mice.

But here this bloke was chasing our scientist with obvious hostile intent. Romero ran through the camp and headed for the time chamber, which stood on a slight rise on the edge with its doors open.

I jumped for the Raja's and my tent and came out with my heavy rifle, in time to see Romero dive in the doors of the chamber. Cohen was in the chamber, making adjustments, and I heard a startled yell from him. Then the doors slammed shut in the steno's face.

The reptile went splat against the steel doors and backed off, shaking its head as if in wonder at human technology. It looked about, seeming to realize for the first time that it had blundered into territory off-limits to dinosaurs.

I hesitated to shoot, lest I hit somebody or something in the camp. The Raja came out with his gun, but he paused likewise. Then the steno set off at a dead run, out of the camp and around the curve of the hill from which it had chased Romero. In a few seconds it was out of sight.

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By banging on the chamber door, we persuaded Cohen to open up. Romero, still breathing hard, came out looking like a lad caught with his hand in the lolly jar. He apologized all over the place: I had seemed too busy to bother, and he took only a litttle stroll, etcetera. Meanwhile Cohen locked the chamber doors behind him in a marked manner.

"But," I said to Romero, "What on earth did you do to rile up that steno? Normally they leave us alone, since we're much too big to serve as their normal prey."

"It was this way," he said. "I walked quietly around the hill till the camp was just out of sight. There was a pair of these stenos on a little flat place, doing a kind of dance. So I watched. One just stood, while the other went through what looked like the calisthenics I do when I get up in the morning. It did deep-knee bends, squatting down and rising up again; then it stayed up but bowed down and touched its head to the ground, over and over. Then it went back to squatting and rising.

"I figured out that this was a mating dance, and the one doing the setting-up exercises was the male, hoping to get the female into a receptive mood. It seemed to be working, because the male extruded that great long hook-shaped hemipenis—or rather, he extruded the half of it on the side toward the female. Then he grabbed the female with his foreclaws, hoisted one leg over her hindquarters, and started feeling around her underside with this organ to find the point of entry.

"I couldn't resist the temptation to shoot a few frames on my camera. Whether the tiny click of the shutter aroused the male, or the motion of my arm, I don't know. But he suddenly stared at me, let go of the female, and withdrew his hook inside him. He uttered a kind of caw, like a crow, and started for me. Not being armed, I ran for it."

The Raja and I had the same thought, and we both burst out laughing. "Sport, he thought you were a rival, who wanted to screw his mate," I said. "Naturally, no right-thinking bull steno is going to stand for that!"

The whole camp had a good laugh over the incident. But then our spirits sank as the clouds formed huge anvils, with lightning and thunder. By the time for tucker, rain was coming down in buckets.

It kept up the whole night. Maybe theropods gathered again round the sauropod carcass to resume their feast; but the storm made so much noise we couldn't have heard them. The next day was more of the same, all day.

"Lousy luck," said Featherstone. "If we can't see the results of the impact from a distance, we don't dare hang around until it happens. The shock wave might catch us unawares and smear us."

Haupt said: "There may be enough light from Enyo to warn us as it makes its final plunge, even through the cloud cover."

"How about the big wave?" asked Romero. "If that Thing lands in

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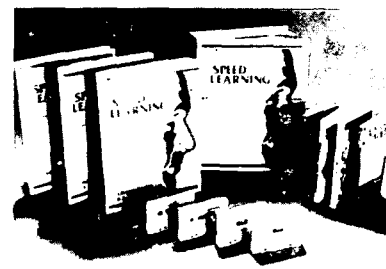

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water, it'll kick up the grandfather of all tsunamis. You know what they say: If you're at the beach and see a tsunami coming, it's already too late to save your life."

"Unless," said Featherstone, "you had a fast motor vehicle and floored the gas away from the beach."

"And if," said Romero, "the road wasn't jammed with other people trying to do the same thing. But how about *this* tsunami?"

"Don't worry," said Haupt. "One might wash inland over flat country for a few kilometers—maybe ten or twenty—but we're at least a hundred kilometers from any sea. The speed—"

"How do you know," interrupted Todd, "that we're a hundred kilometers from the sea, when we haven't a map of the area for this period?"

Haupt answered with the forced patience of a schoolma'am with a backward pupil. "Because if it were closer, we could see it plainly from this altitude. The speed of the wave would be only a fraction of that of sound, which is a little over 330 meters per second, and which is also the speed of the shock wave."

I held up a hand to quiet the argument and said: "Listen, please. We shall get up hours before the expected impact. Then we shall load into the chamber all the stuff we plan to take back with us and stand by the doors, ready to leap in the minute you blokes see a flash in the sky. We shan't wait for any shock wave but take off for Present instantly."

So it was decided; but as things turned out, that scenario did not prove necessary. During a day of rain, I had to listen to Todd's complaints over not getting a second hunt, and O'Connor's complaints over not being able to paint more pictures, as if I were somehow responsible for the weather.

The evening before the Event, the rain tapered off and the clouds broke up. We loaded into the chamber the stuff we were taking back, like Todd's sauropod head and O'Connor's pictures. Ming hauled a bag full of our new kitchen utensils; he wasn't going to sacrifice them if he could help it.

When we got up before dawn, we had a clear, deep-blue sky overhead, in which the stars were going out one by one as the glow of the coming sunrise brightened in the east.

"Where's Enyo?" I asked Haupt.

"She'll be up any minute," he said. "The Earth has to turn more toward her—ah, there she comes! Call your gang together!"

Rising from the southeastern horizon, which was still a pretty dark blue, came another spot of light, somewhat resembling the planet Venus at her maximum brightness. I stared at it but could not see any relative motion between Enyo and the few stars still visible.

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"Is she going to make it?" I asked Haupt. "She doesn't seem to be getting anywhere."

"She's moving, but too slowly to make out with the bare eyeball," he said. After we had stood for a while, jittering and thinking—at least I was thinking—whether it wouldn't have been smarter to have used robot instruments instead of human observers, Haupt said: "Look carefully, now. She's visibly declining toward the horizon."

I looked; and sure enough, the spot had moved. Down it went, at first as slowly as the minute hand of a clock, then faster.

"There she goes!" cried Haupt.

The spot disappeared below the horizon, but almost at once a glow sprang up in the southeast. The glow of the coming sunrise in the east was already quite bright, but it was as if two suns were rising at the same time, almost a right angle apart. The normal sunrise went on at its usual leisurely pace; but the other one brightened much faster. Then there was a perfect blaze of light from south-by-east. I shan't say it was brighter than a million suns; but for a few seconds it made the true rising sun in the east look like a mere candle.

"Look at the horizon," said Romero. "I think the people who bet on Windward Passage are going to lose. The bearing indicates Yucatan."

The bright light faded, but then followed something the like of which I had never seen. A kind of illuminated dome thrust up over the horizon. This thing went up and up, becoming the top of a vast single column. It was of mixed colors, mostly red. Along the top it was a dark red, with a kind of ragged appearance, as if made of a million separate jets of steam or water or lava. Further down the column, the color brightened to a brilliant yellow at the base, and little blue flashes of lightning played all over the surface of the whole fantastic thing. Romero said:

"What's the azimuth of that, Einar?"

Haupt squinted and made an adjustment, with his eye to the lens. "Eighty-four—no, eighty-five degrees."

"That would be the east coast of Yucatan," said Romero.

I asked Haupt: "Why haven't we heard anything?"

He said: "What do you expect? That's about two thousand kilometers from here, so it'll take at least twenty minutes for the sound and the shock wave to get here."

I looked at my watch and said: "Twenty minutes, and we must all be in the chamber and buttoned up. Has anybody any last-minute thing he wants to do?"

The column continued to rise, although more slowly, and the colors darkened and faded a bit. It reminded me of a flick I once saw, showing the explosion of the American H-bomb on some poor little island in the Pacific. This was something like that, but on a vastly greater scale.

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"Fifteen minutes!" I said. "Are you ready to let us in, Bruce?"

"Yep," said Cohen.

"I'll hold the door when he opens it," said the Raja.

"Ten minutes!"

A band of darkness appeared above the horizon and seemed to be creeping closer.

"Dust, smoke, and water vapor, I think," said Featherstone.

Change crept over the cypress-swamp plain before us. It started at the limits of vision and came swiftly closer. The change was the turning of the whole forest into a vast bonfire. The trees along the leading edge of the change blazed up in bright yellow and orange and then were hidden by a colossal cloud of black smoke, while the next nearer line of forest blazed up likewise.

"There's our shock wave," said Featherstone.

"Five minutes!" I said. "Into the chamber, all of you! Fast!"

We ran to the chamber, to find Cohen and the Raja on hands and knees in front of the closed doors.

"What in God's name?" I cried.

"Bruce dropped his keys," said the Raja. "Don't anybody disturb the soil!"

They hunted and hunted, sweeping their hands over the ground. The time couldn't have been more than seconds, but to me it seemed hours. I thought the dawnlight was already dimmed by the onrushing cloud of smoke, but that may have been my imagination.

"Let me," said Todd. He produced an electric torch, which he played back and forth over the ground. Just as it looked hopeless, Cohen yelled: "Got 'em!" and pounced.

At any rate, Todd had proved himself something more than a mere pain in the arse. Cohen got the door open the quickest I'd ever seen, and we piled in. I counted noses as they went by and said:

"Where's O'Connor? Oh, *Jon!* Where the bloody hell are you?"

"Coming," said O'Connor, walking in a leisurely manner from the tents towards the chamber, with a framed square of canvas under his arm. "Forgot this sketch," he explained.

"*Run,* God damn it!" I yelled.

At last I got him safely inside and then myself. Bruce Cohen, at the controls, had his hand out to the door-closing lever, when another shadow fell across the doorway. I was sure all my sahibs were in. Several set up a yell as the newcomer leaped in with more agility than any mere human being could command.

Cohen hesitated, then frantically pulled the lever. The doors slammed shut. The newcomer uttered a squawk, because the closing doors had snipped off the last centimeter or two of the point of its long tail. It was

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in fact a steno, like the one that had chased George Romero into the chamber two days before.

"Take her to Present!" I shouted at Cohen, who was already working his controls.

There was a motion of the chamber that was not just going through time; it was a physical movement in the late Cretaceous.

"Earthquake!" cried Featherstone.

By then Cohen had us well on the time-travel route. The lights dimmed, and everybody felt the horrid vertigo and vibration and nausea. I looked toward our stowaway, huddled in a corner of the chamber near the door. What the hell should we do with it? To fire a shot in those close quarters would be suicide. On the other hand, to leave our people at the mercy of a Mesozoic carnivore. . . .

"He seems unaggressive, Reggie," said the Raja. "Must have remembered the chamber from the day before yesterday and, when he saw his world going up in smoke, figured that this was the safest place for him. They're considered bright as reptiles—oh, oh!"

The nausea affected the *Stenonychosaurus* so that it puked up its last meal on the floor of the chamber. Bruce Cohen, when he saw, did some of the fanciest swearing I've ever heard. Made the most eloquent bushie seem like a schoolma'am.

The Raja was right about the steno's being smarter than most reptiles. Some museum coves reason that if it hadn't been for Enyo, the dinosaurs might still be going strong, and the steno's descendants might have evolved into the reptilian equivalent of mankind.

"If we leave him alone," said the Raja, "he'll probably do likewise to us. He must have been more frightened by the Event than by us. Lots of zoos would love a live dinosaur. The museum that tried to bring back eggs had no luck; they didn't hatch. I'll see if he'll let me bandage his tail; you know me and animals."

"By God!" said Romero. "I do believe he's my sometime rival for the affections of that female. Has the same scar on his muzzle. The poor girl will have been killed by the shock wave."

"Too bad we couldn't bring the pair back," said Featherstone, "and breed them."

I said: "If you museum blokes will produce the money to fetch a pair, you'll find Rivers and Aiyar ready to talk business."

And that, Mr. Burgess, is the story of my closest call. It's like being shot at and missed. Makes you feel good at the time and gives you a story to dine out on; but on the whole you'd rather not take that kind of chance again. No more for me, thanks. My wife's due to pick me up. Ta-ta! ●

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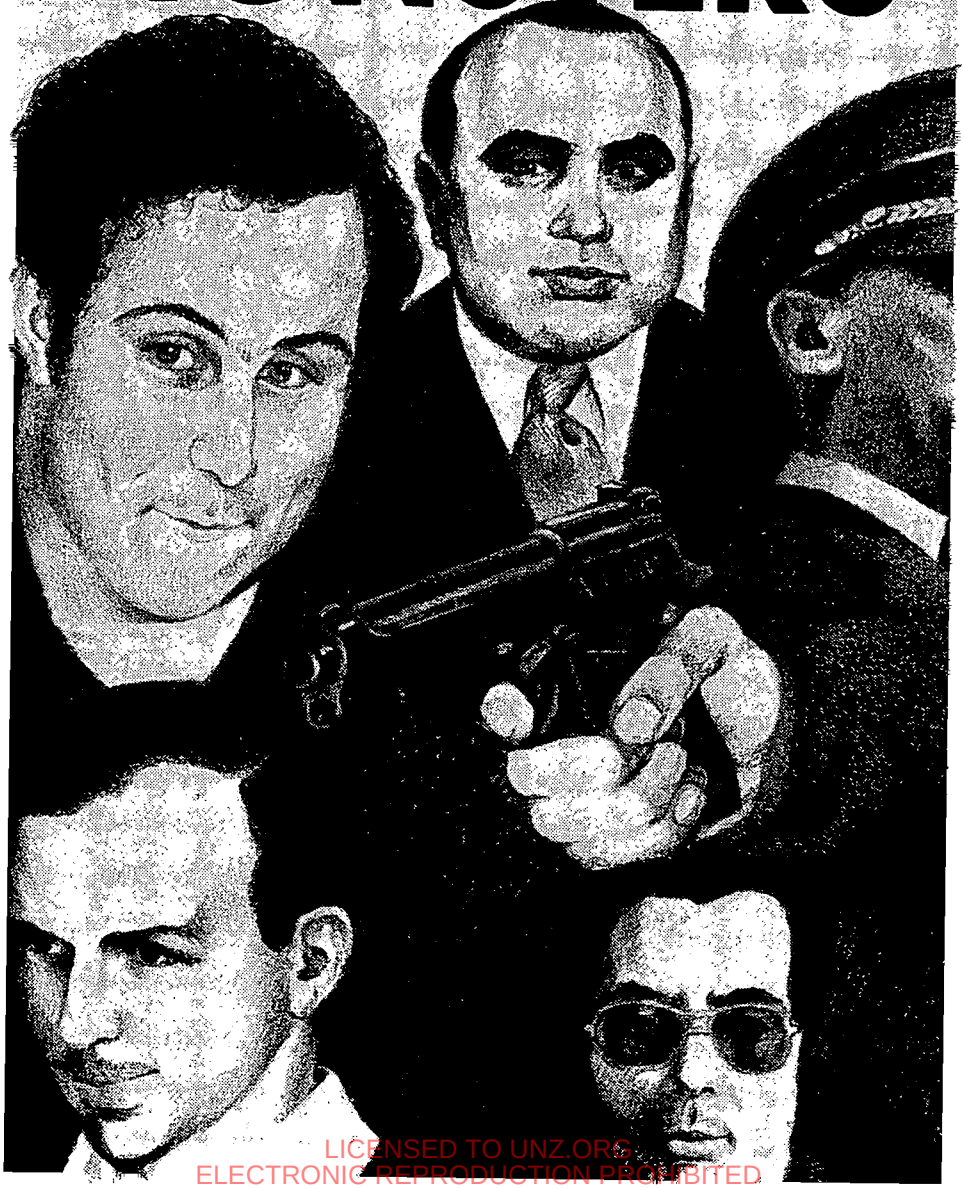
James Patrick Kelly

MONSTERS



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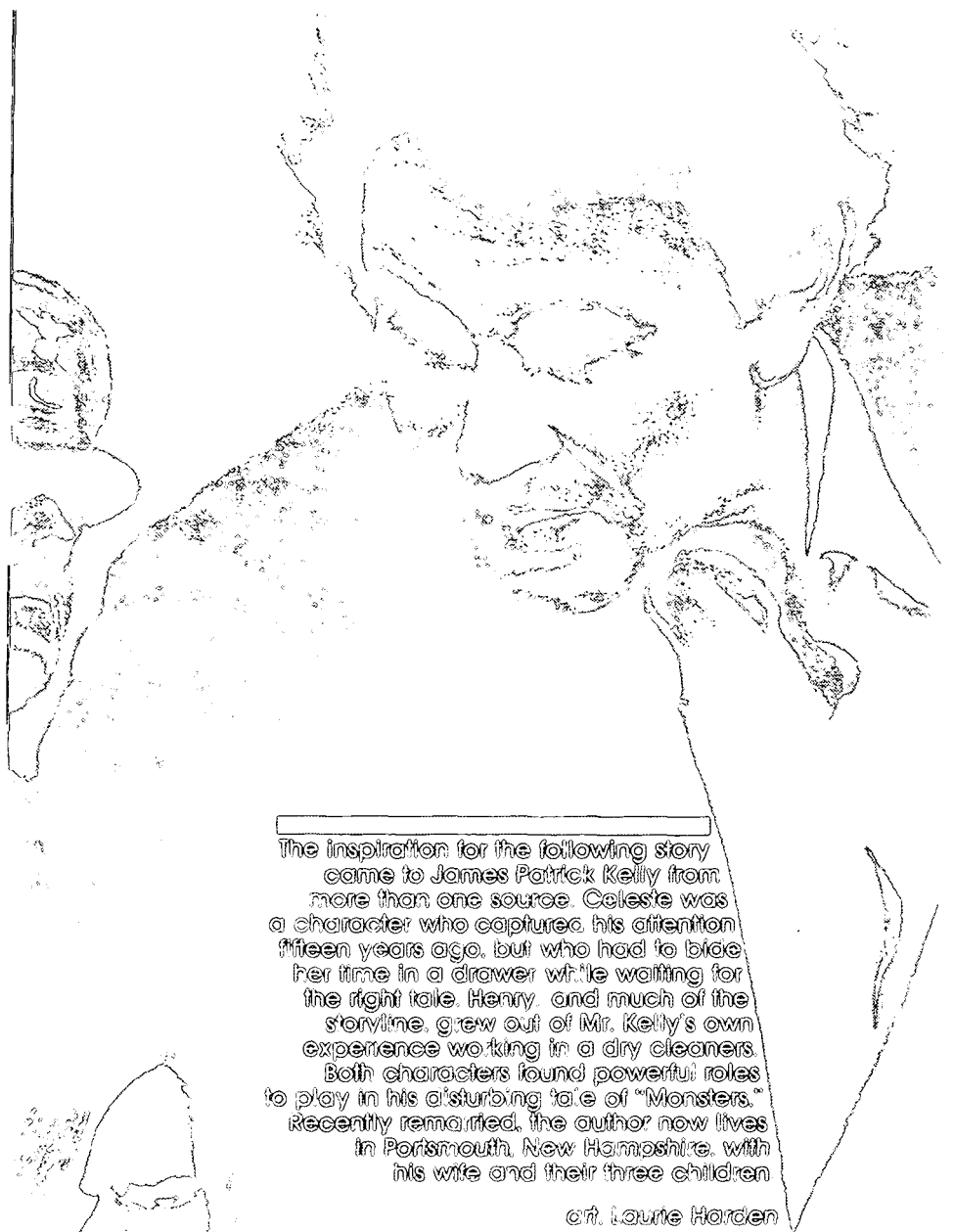

The inspiration for the following story came to James Patrick Kelly from more than one source. Celeste was a character who captured his attention fifteen years ago, but who had to bide her time in a drawer while waiting for the right tale. Henry, and much of the storyline, grew out of Mr. Kelly's own experience working in a dry cleaners. Both characters found powerful roles to play in his disturbing tale of "Monsters." Recently remarried, the author now lives in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, with his wife and their three children.

art, Laurie Harden

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When Henry looked in his dad's old mirror, he couldn't see the monster. He touched his reflection. Nothing. No shock, no secret thrill, not even a tingle. Usually his nipples tightened or the insides of his knees would get crinkly, and if he were in a certain mood he'd crawl back under the covers and think very hard about women in black strapless bras. But this morning—zero. He stared at a fattish naked white man with thinning hair and yellow teeth. A face as interesting as lint. He wished for a long purple tongue or a disfiguring scar that forked down his cheek, except he didn't want any pain. Not for himself, anyway. Henry hated looking so vanilla. There was nothing terrifying about him except the bad thoughts, which he told no one, not even God. But this morning the monster was cagey. It wanted to get loose and he was tired of holding it back. Something was going to happen. He decided not to shave.

The gray dacron shirt and shiny blue polyester pants hanging on the line over the bathtub had dripped dry overnight. His nylon underwear was dry too, but the orlon socks were still damp so he draped them over the towel bar. Henry wore synthetics because they wouldn't shrink or wrinkle and he could wash them in the sink. Some days, after wallowing in other people's mung, he boiled his clothes. He liked his showers hot too; he stood in the rusty old clawfooted tub for almost half an hour until his skin bloomed like a rose. The shower beat all the thoughts out of his head; nothing wormy had ever happened in the tub. He opened his mouth, let it fill with hot water and spat at the wall.

He owned just five shirts: gray, white, beige, blue, and blue-striped; and three pairs of pants: blue, gray, and black. As he tried to decide what to wear to work, he had a bad thought. Not a thought exactly—he flashed an image of himself bending toward a TV minicam, hands locked behind him as he was pushed into a police car. Blue or blue-striped would show up best on the six o'clock news.

He petted the shirts. Maybe he was already crazy, but it seemed to him that if he wore blue today, it might set off the chain reaction of choices the creature was always trying to start. He pulled the white shirt from its hanger.

Henry ate only two kinds of breakfast cereal, Cheerios and Rice Chex. Over the years he had tried to simplify his life; routines were a defense against bad thoughts. That's why he always watched the Weather Channel when he ate Cheerios. He liked the satellite pictures of storms sweeping across the country because he thought that was what weather must look like to God. He didn't understand how people could think weather was boring; obviously they hadn't seen it get loose.

After breakfast he tried to slip past the shrine and out the front door, but he couldn't. The monster was stirring even though he had chosen the white shirt. He dug the key out of his pocket, opened the shrine and

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turned on the light. He was in the apartment's only closet, seven feet by four. Henry bolted the door behind him.

The walls were shaggy with pictures he'd ripped out of magazines but he didn't look at them. Not yet. He pressed the play button on the boom box and the Rolling Stones bongoed into "Sympathy for the Devil." He knelt at the oak chest which served as the altar. Inside was a plastic box. Inside the box, cradled in pink velvet, was the Beretta.

He had bought the 92SB because of its honest lines. A little bulky in the grip, the salesman had said, but only because inside was a fifteen shot double-column magazine. It was cool as a snake to the touch, thirty-five hard ounces of steel, anodized aluminum and black plastic. He wrapped his right hand around the grip and felt the gentle bite of the serrations on the front and rear of the frame. He stood, supported his right hand with his left, extended his arms and howled along with Jagger. "Ow!"

Schwarzenegger trembled in his sights; even cyborgs feared the thing lurking inside Henry West. "Now!" The pistol had a thrilling heft; it was more real than he was. *"Wham!"* he cried, then let his arms drop. Manson gave him a shaggy grimace of approval. Madonna shook her tits. The monster was stretching; its claw slid up his throat.

He spun then and ruined Robert Englund, *wham,* David Duke, *wham,* and Mike Tyson, *wham, wham, wham.* Metallica gave him sweaty glares. Imelda Marcos simpered. Henry let a black rain of bad thoughts drench him. He'd give in and let it loose on the Market Street bus or in the First Savings where that twisty young teller never looked at him when she cashed his paycheck. He'd blaze into Rudy's Lunch Bucket like that guy in Texas and keep slapping magazines into the Beretta until he had the mass murder record. Only not when Stefan was behind the counter. Stefan always gave him an extra pickle. Or else he'd just suck on the gun himself, take a huge bloody gulp of death. He sagged against Jim Jones, laughing so he wouldn't scream.

"Why me, God?" he said, rubbing the barrel along the stubble on his chin. "Let me pass on this, okay?" But He wasn't listening. Just because He could be everywhere, didn't mean He'd want to be. He wouldn't stoop to this place, not while Henry was celebrating slaughter.

When the music ended, he fit the pistol back into its velvet cradle. He felt split into two different Henrys, both of them moist and expended. Part of him suspected this was nothing more than a bughouse riff, like old Jagger prancing across some stage playing Lucifer. The Beretta wasn't even loaded; he'd hidden the ammo under the sink behind the paper towels. But if this were nothing but pretend, why did it give him more pleasure than a mushroom pizza and a jug of Carlo Rossi Pink Chablis and a new stroke flick? It may have started as a game, but it

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felt real now. Under the influence of the gun, he was solid as a brick. The rest of his life was smog.

He locked the shrine behind him and went back to the mirror, the only thing he'd kept when he closed Dad's house. The creature leered at him. He stuck out his thumb and smudged his reflected eye. The hair on the back of his neck prickled. He thought then he knew what was going to happen. It wanted to touch someone else and he was going to let it.

The new bus driver was a plush moon-faced woman. She didn't even bother to look at him as he slid a dollar onto her outstretched hand, brushing fingertips quickly across the ridges of her skin. He was nobody to her, another zero. The monster's looping murderous rage was building like an electric charge as she jabbed at the coin dispenser for his change. Notice me, pay attention. She dropped the quarter into his palm and he curled his fingers suddenly, grazing her palm. The unholy spark of madness crackled between them. She yipped, jerked her hand away and stared at him. "Oops," he said. "Sorry." She gave him an uneasy laugh, like someone who has just suffered through a sick joke she didn't want to hear. She'd think it was just static—what else could it be? She couldn't know how good it felt to give away pain. He was still grinning when he swung into an empty seat and saw her watching him in the rear view mirror.

Another monster worked at Kaplan's Cleaners. Celeste Sloboda pressed and folded shirts across the room. Only she didn't count. She hadn't made the choice; she'd been born a hunchback. Besides, she wore her thick black hair down to her belt when she wasn't working, trying to cover her deformity. She would've had better luck hiding a chainsaw in her purse. What made it worse was that Celeste was tiny, barely five feet; she looked like a twelve-year-old going on forty, complete with sags and wrinkles and a hump the size of a turkey. She smiled too much and hummed to herself and yattered about her cats as if they were smarter than she was. Jerry said she was kind of cute if you pretended she wasn't lopsided but Henry didn't have that kind of imagination.

He knew that the reason Celeste kept honeying up to him was that she wanted to switch over to the cleaning side. Kaplan kept crabbing that there was no money in shirts, that he only took them so that shirt customers would bring in cleaning business. If Kaplan axed shirts, he'd have to axe Celeste too—or else move her to Henry's side. But Henry already had a helper and, even though Jerry was a jack-around, at least he left Henry alone.

Celeste perched on a stool, steaming shirts on the form press they called the susie. The laundry had delivered just three mesh bags; usually

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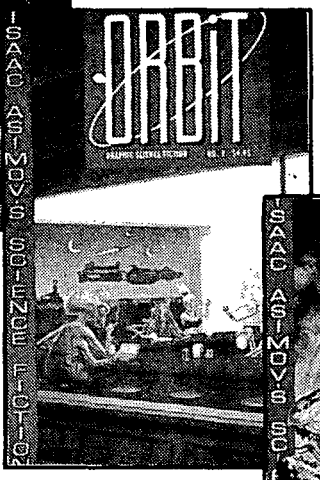

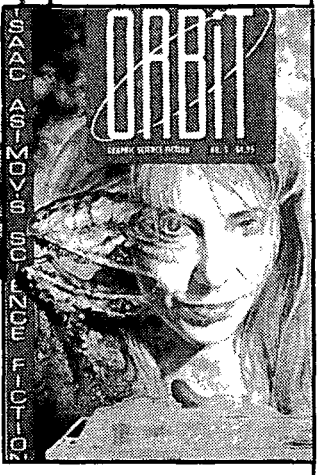

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there were between five and eight. "Guess what I had for breakfast today?" she said.

Henry, at the spotting bench, did not reply. In the six months Celeste had been at Kaplan's, he'd learned to pretend that he couldn't hear her over the rumble of the cleaning drum.

"Broccoli in Velveeta sauce. I know you think that's weird but then you think everything I do is weird. Besides, I like leftovers for breakfast. Meat loaf, potatoes, lasagna, I don't care. When I was a kid I knew this girl poured root beer on her corn flakes so I guess broccoli for breakfast isn't so bad."

Henry followed a trail of coffee splatters up the placket of a silk blouse, sponging them with wet spotter. He blotted the blouse and set it aside for a few moments.

"What if our bodies don't wake up all at once? I mean, the eyes are always last, right? Ears wake up before. I swear I can smell coffee brewing even though I'm asleep. So maybe my taste buds have insomnia or something. Say they're up at two in the morning. By six-thirty, it's lunch time. I can't remember the last time I ate bacon and eggs. What did you have for breakfast, Henry?"

He scraped the splotch on the lapel of a charcoal suit jacket with his fingernail. Some kind of wax—a candlelight dinner gone sour? The cleaning machine buzzed and the drum creaked to a stop.

Celeste cupped a hand over her mouth. "I said, what did you have for breakfast?"

"You talking to me?" He flushed the wax away with the steam gun. "Cheerios." He tossed the jacket into a basket filled with darks. "With milk." There were enough clothes in it to make a new load. "Jerry," he called. "Yo, Jerry!"

"He's pretending he can't hear you." Celeste giggled. "Probably trying to get into Maggie's pants."

That was his squawk with Jerry. When something needed doing, Jerry was either at the front counter flirting with the cashier or in the bathroom. Henry ducked around the coat hanging beside the spotting bench, grabbed an empty basket and wheeled it to the cleaning machine. As he gathered the warm clothes from the drum he breathed in harsh perchloroethylene fumes. He pushed the basket over to the empty rail next to the presses. Perk nauseated some people, but Henry liked the smell. It filled his head like "Stairway to Heaven."

"How do you clean a syrup stain, anyway?" said Celeste.

"I thought you didn't eat breakfast stuff." He started pulling the clothes onto hangers and setting them on the rail. "You want my job, is that it?"

"Your job?" She buttoned a white spread-collar shirt onto the susie

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and stepped on the compressed air pedal. With a hiss, steam ballooned the shirt away from the form and jetted from the neck and sleeves. "Don't be paranoid, Henry—you're the best. Just trying for a little friendly chit-chat, is all." She pulled at her hair net. "Hey, I like pancakes for supper. Syrup's an accident I'll probably have someday."

He grunted and hung the last of the load on the rail. "Sponge it with water then use wet spotter with a couple drops of vinegar. When it's loose, you blot."

"Now was that so hard? Shit, how come getting you to say anything is like moving a refrigerator?" She wiped her forehead. Her work smock, already limp with moisture, clung to her child's body. Pressing shirts on the susie was hot, dreary work. At least on his side, every garment was different. Henry didn't blame her for being bored; he just didn't want to entertain her.

Henry was pitching darks into the machine when Kaplan elbowed the back door open. He was carrying a bag filled with takeout from Rudy's.

"Gonna rain." Louis Kaplan was a pink little man who wore a short-sleeved shirt and a paisley tie that some customer had neglected to pick up—probably on purpose. He set the bag on a shelf next to a jug of acetone. "What're you doing?" he said to Henry. Without waiting for an answer, he turned to Celeste. "What's he doing?"

"Getting ready to run a load?" she said.

"I can see that. But I'm not paying him to do the idiot work. Where's Jerry?"

"I didn't know it was my turn to watch him." She pulled a damp shirt from the blue mesh laundry bag beside her and snapped it out. Kaplan scuttled toward the front of the store.

"If that's what being boss does to you, I'm sure as hell glad it's him in charge and not me." She draped the shirt over the susie. "Well, I'm ready for a break."

While Henry finished emptying the basket into the drum, she pulled an assortment of styrofoam coffee cups and cardboard sandwich boxes from the bag and sorted through them. "Want yours now?"

"Not yet." He didn't want her near him. Touching the bus driver hadn't satisfied the thing inside him. Maybe she hadn't felt enough pain. All morning long the monster's need had been swelling like a balloon. If Celeste accidently touched him, he wasn't sure he could keep it from striking out at her. He had never let it touch anyone at work before.

"You get time off for good behavior, Henry."

"I said, in a minute."

She shrugged and went back to her stool, unwrapped an egg bagel with cream cheese and lox. Only when she was settled did he pick out his tea with extra milk and the English muffin. Coffee break could be

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the longest fifteen minutes of the day. He needed Jerry right now to shield him from Celeste. That was about all the kid was good for. What were they doing up there?

"Don't you ever get bored eating the same damn muffin over and over again?" she said.

"It's a new muffin every day."

He was dunking the tea bag when he heard someone up front shouting; the racks of clean clothes muffled the sound. "Shush!" As he strained to hear, he felt a twinge of dread. He hadn't worn the blue but still, something was happening. The noise got closer; he recognized Jerry's whine.

"What do you want me to say? No, *really,* tell me what I'm supposed to say. I mean, I'm sorry and all and it won't happen again."

Kaplan was the first through the door; his pink face had flushed a meaty red.

"Why won't you *listen* to me?" Jerry tagged behind like a bad dog on a short leash. "Nobody saw, really. How could they? We were way, way back, behind the 'W' rack."

Kaplan hesitated, trapped by his own machines. If he wanted to keep walking away from Jerry, he'd have to leave the store. He glanced blindly around before deciding his only escape was to dive into a cup of Rudy's coffee.

"*Please,* Louis."

Jerry tried to come around to face him but Kaplan veered away. He clutched the styrofoam cup close to him and fixed on it as if it were telling him secrets.

"Nobody could've seen us back there," said Jerry. "Go look for yourself. Besides there *weren't* any customers. Maggie was listening for the door chime. Mr. Kaplan, please say something."

The creature squirmed in delight at Kaplan's distress, watching as he worried the drink tab on the lid. "You had your hand in her pants."

Celeste used both hands to smother a giggle and Jerry realized he had an audience. Since Kaplan's back was turned, he let a grin slink across his face.

"No, no," he said. "You don't understand. Yes, we were kissing. That's what you saw and I'm sorry but it's not what you think."

Kaplan tore the plastic lid off and hot coffee slopped onto his hand and down his trousers. "Shit!" When he tried to dance out of the way, he bumped into Jerry and half the cup splatted onto his shoes. Celeste laughed out loud.

"Okay, okay, so I was playing with the elastic a little." Jerry's smirk curdled what little sincerity he had left. "But that was as far as we were going. I mean, this is a public place. We're not *stupid* or anything."

"You're right, Jerry. You're not stupid." Kaplan put the dripping coffee

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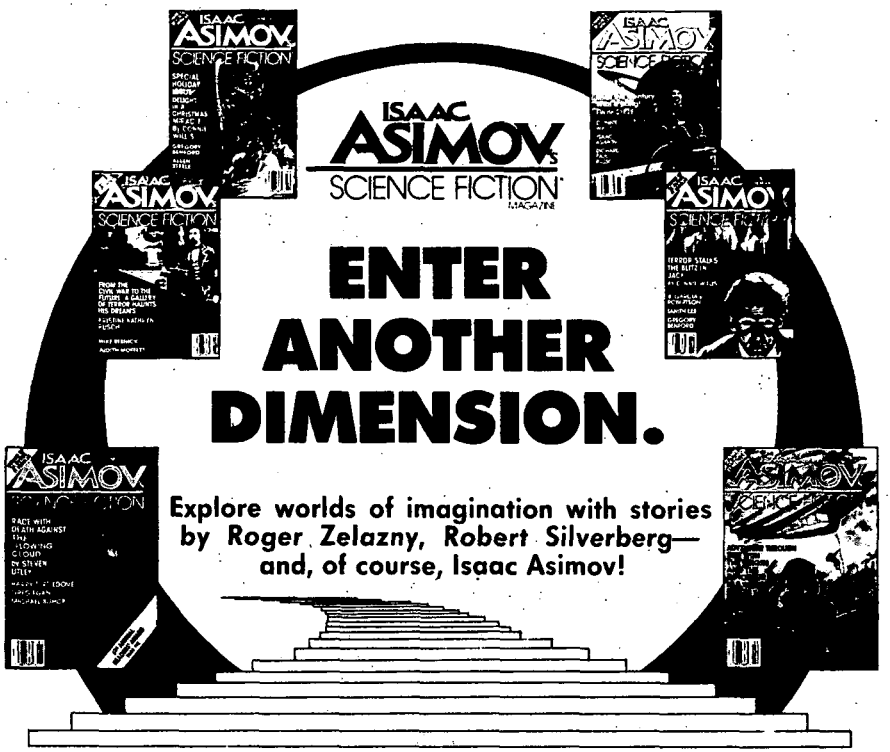
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cup back on the shelf as if it were a weight he was glad to set down. "I'm the stupid." He finally turned to confront Jerry. "You've worked here for two whole months and done nothing but screw up. I guess that makes me dumb as a box of rocks. But I've learned my lesson, kid. Get your stuff and go. You're finished."

"You're firing me?" Jerry seemed to shrink six inches. "What is this, a joke?"

"I'll give you a week's severance. The check will be ready by closing. You can come back then."

"Oh come on, Mr. Kaplan. Give me a break."

His voice was hard as the sidewalk. "Take your lunch, you can even take your coffee, if you want. But go."

"Henry." Jerry spun toward him in desperation. "You can't let this happen. He'll make you do both our jobs, Henry. Tell him you need help."

Henry was certain that if he opened his mouth the monster would leap out and strangle them all. Jerry plucked a vest from the basket and shook it at Henry. "Who do you think is going to clean this? Miss Dumpty Humpty?"

"He already does most of your work," said Celeste. "Asshole."

"Celeste," said Kaplan. "Enough."

"No." Jerry threw the vest to the floor. "I'm not going anywhere unless you ask Henry. He runs this place but you're all afraid of him. I'm the only one he ever talks to."

A sound like the squealing of brakes filled Henry's head. He knew it wasn't real but held his breath, waiting for the crash.

"Celeste," said Kaplan, "I think you should call the police. Tell them we're having a little problem here."

"See, Henry?" Jerry was full of scorn. "They don't even trust you with the phone."

"Get the hell out of my store!" Kaplan stepped toward Jerry.

Celeste edged off her stool. Henry tried to think of a way to stop her. He knew Jerry and Kaplan were very close to fighting; she was going to keep them from hurting each other. When he closed his eyes, Henry saw broken teeth and dark blood beading on the floor tiles. His fists clenched. This was so much better than the shrine. He had never been this close to real violence before.

"Aww, fuck all of you." Jerry snatched his coat. "I never liked working here anyway. The pay sucks and you're nothing but a bunch of loonies and losers." He retreated toward the back door. "Just make sure my check is ready." He stalked out, not even bothering to slam the door behind him.

Kaplan slumped against the spotting bench. "I'm sorry you had to listen to that." Henry guessed he meant both of them, even though he

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was speaking to Celeste. "I should've taken care of him after work, but I. . . . Listen, we're going to have to pull together for a couple of days." He looked about as together as dust. "I'll get an ad in the paper right away. I—I should stay up front today, keep an eye on Maggie. What I think we need to do is keep pushing the cleaning out on schedule, which means you'll have to help Henry. If there's time left, we'll worry about the shirts. No money in goddamn shirts, anyway." He considered for a moment, then gathered himself. "That little weasel." He pushed away from the bench and clapped his hands. "So, then, can we handle this?"

Henry had been flashing Kaplan firing Jerry after work, when there'd be no witnesses. Jerry coldcocked the brittle old man, then straddled him and grasped the pink head between his hands. When he pounded it against the floor, it exploded like a light bulb. The monster was frustrated that nothing had happened. "It stinks," Henry said.

"I'm sorry, Henry. Just give me a couple of days."

"Don't worry, Louis," said Celeste. "We'll handle it."

Kaplan shot her a grateful look and hurried off to keep Maggie from ransacking the till. Henry bent to snare the vest Jerry had thrown. He dropped it in the hamper.

"Look at you." Celeste chuckled. "He's gone and you're still picking up after him."

"It's your fault." He snapped at her. "You laughed, you got him fired."

"That's bullshit, Henry, and you know it. Jerry blew this job off long ago. If you ask me, he got what he deserved. I'm sorry if that bothers you. I'm sorry if you hate my guts. But other people don't make you do bad things. You do them yourself."

Even though she was wrong, he didn't reply; she'd only chew his ear some more. He folded his untouched muffin and rammed it into the cup still half full of lukewarm tea. Of course other people could make you do wrong. Henry was proof of that. And he didn't really hate her. Yes, the grotesque hump repelled him and she had the personality of Brillo but he was also a little sorry for her.

It was the monster who hated her.

"So what do you want me to do?" she said.

Henry figured that the reason it was always dark in church was because God didn't like bright places. His God tended to lurk in the shadows and not say much, like a stranger at a wedding. When He spoke in His midnight whisper, it always took Henry by surprise. God certainly wasn't a rattletongue like Celeste or a smartmouth like Jerry. Henry believed that He preferred the dark because, like Henry, He was shy.

Even though Our Lady of Mercy was only two blocks from Kaplan's, Henry's midday routine was to bring his lunch to St. Sebastian's because

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the light there was so bad that it was hard for anyone to see him eating. Also, Sebastian was the martyr that some Roman emperor had shot full of arrows; his painting was in the side chapel. Henry liked to sit in the third pew from the back with his regular tuna sandwich, pickle, and chocolate milk. The priests usually left him alone because he never made a mess, but sometimes parishioners would crab at him.

The rain had come earlier than predicted, chasing at least a dozen other people into the church, so he had to be cagey about eating. And the clouds had dulled his favorite stained glass; the reds had gone to mud, the blues almost black. Each of the fourteen narrow windows of St. Sebastian's depicted one of the Stations of the Cross. Henry liked to pray to the sixth: Veronica wiping the face of Jesus. Once, years ago, he had wondered whether the impression of His face that Jesus had left on Veronica's handkerchief could be removed with wet spotter, or maybe a hydrogen peroxide soak. It was as close as he had ever come to having a bad thought in church.

After he had finished the pickle, he slid forward onto the kneeler to say a Hail Mary. The monster snuffed the prayer by ramming a fist up Henry's windpipe. He rocked back onto the pew, choking. People turned to stare; Henry put a hand to his mouth and pretended to cough into it. It took a moment before he could breathe again. He sat very still, closed his eyes and tried not to panic. *Our Father,* he thought, *Who art in* . . . his head snapped back as veins of fire pulsed across his lids; it felt as if someone were squashing his eyes into his skull. He couldn't speak, couldn't even think to Him. Henry had never needed God's help more. Why couldn't he ask for it? Nothing else had changed: Up at the altar, votive candles still flickered like angels and the tabernacle glittered with the gold of heaven. But Henry could not pray. He covered his face with his hands.

"Hey, you. *Bum.*"

Henry turned and blinked at a pale twitchy man in a rain-spattered blue jacket stitched with the name Phil.

"This is a church, scumbag." Phil's voice swelled with outrage, snapping through the gloom like a sermon. "Not some flop where you can sleep off a drunk. You understand? And look at all this garbage. Go on, get out of here!"

Henry crumpled the sandwich box and the wax paper into a ball. The last place he wanted something to happen was in God's house. He sensed the creature plugging into the man's anger, feeding off it into a frenzy. If Phil tried to hurt him, it would hurt him back. *Oh God.* He had to get away before it was too late. As he gathered in the milk carton, Phil decided he wasn't hurrying fast enough.

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"Now, bum! Or I'm calling the cops." He grabbed at Henry to haul him out of the pew.

He tried to twist away but Phil's hand closed on his shoulder. Henry moaned with dread and pleasure as he yielded to the madness. The spark surged down his arm; muscles spasmed in an explosion of awful strength. He snapped his attacker back as easily as a wet shirt. Phil hit the wall of the church with a sharp *crack*. He sagged to the floor, face slack, eyes like eggs.

Someone screamed. The shock of monstrous pleasure had left Henry momentarily limp; now he shuddered and flung himself out of the pew past the body. The touch had never been this good before, this vicious. He sprinted through the baptistry out the side door into the rain. He ran five blocks before he realized no one was paying attention to him. Everyone was hunkered down against the weather.

He slowed to a walk. His cheeks were hot; he was in no hurry to get out of the rain. The monster was spent and he was back in control. He hadn't felt this relaxed in weeks. What harm had been done, really? Phil would wake up with a headache and a story he'd exaggerate down at the corner bar for years. So Henry would have lunch at Our Lady of Mercy for a while. Or find an even darker church.

"Hail Mary, full of grace," he said to a parking meter. "The Lord is with thee." He fished a dime from his pocket, cranked it into the slot and the violation flag clicked down. "Deliver us from evil." He laughed. "Amen."

By the time he got back to Kaplan's, he had convinced himself that for today, at least, he'd left the nightmare behind.

It rained that afternoon on everyone but Henry; he was still shining hours after lunch. Even Celeste's yattering failed to rile him, perhaps because she talked mostly about drycleaning instead of her cats and rice pudding and the world's tallest woman. And she worked much harder than Jerry; he was secretly impressed. She may have been a rattletongue, but when Celeste started something, it got done.

He was pressing pants and she was hanging whites. "How long ago did you start in cleaning anyway?" she said. "Ten years, twenty?"

"Before your time."

"Really?" She brightened. "How old do you think I am?"

He didn't understand why she was still honeying up to him, now that she had what she wanted. Henry pulled a pair of gray pinstripes off the rail and ignored her.

"Don't be such a gentleman. The answer is thirty-six, same age as you. Or at least that's how old Jerry said you were. Unless he was making it up."

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"No."

"So how come you never opened a store of your own?"

He stepped on the compressor pedal; steam billowed through the pants. His own shop? That's what his dad used to say. But the thought had never appealed to Henry; he had enough to worry about.

"After all," said Celeste, "you know the business."

"Twenty-five pounder is the smallest rig they make." He nodded at the drycleaning machine. "Cost Kaplan thirty grand." He took his foot off the steam pedal and the pants deflated. "You've got to be smart to play for those stakes."

"So? You're smart. All you need is a rich uncle. Or else hit the lottery. I play my birthday and Madonna's every week. 7/28/56 and 8/16/58. Tell you what: when I win, I'll stake you. Only you have to name the store after me. Sloboda's Cleaners."

Brown gabardines were next on the rail. He said nothing.

"Because it's nice work," she said, "drycleaning. I mean, it's fun because there's progress. You can see what you've done at the end of the day, not like bagging groceries or stitching shoes. You start with something ugly and it ends up pretty. How many jobs are there where you try to make the world a more beautiful place?"

Henry had no idea; he cared zero for the world. He liked the iron tang of steam hissing from the presses, the furriness of wet wool, the backbeat of the spinning drum, the way silk clung like caterpillars to his rough skin, the perfect chemical luster of nylon, the attic smell of shirt cardboards, leather jackets as heavy as raw steak, the airiness of rayon, the delicate crinkling of plastic bags fresh off the roll, and especially the intoxicating palette of chemicals at the spotting table. He liked sweating through his tank top in the numbing heat of July, and basking in the cozy humidity of the back room at Christmas. What mattered to Henry was that the job filled his senses and kept away the bad thoughts. Mostly.

"Yeah," she was saying, "I like it here just fine even though it's not exactly what I want to do for the rest of my life." She waved her finger at him. "Don't you dare tell Kaplan I said that. I'm trusting you."

A pair of tan suit pants.

"No, what I really want to be someday is a travel agent. That way I'll get to go all over so I can tell people where the best times are. You know, like a librarian has to read all those books? Because I'd love to see the pyramids and China and San Francisco and the Disneys—all the Disneys. I read where they have one in France now. And learn to ski. And I'm going to try all those warm places where you just lay around on the beach in your bikini and waiters bring you drinks with cherries in them."

The idea of Celeste in a bikini made him laugh. She'd need to buy a third piece to cover her hump.

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"Yeah, what's so funny?" She was suddenly brittle, as if a cruel word might shatter her. "You don't think I could do it?"

He had never seen her fold up like this; maybe she had never told him anything that mattered before. He sensed that if he said what he really thought, she might never speak to him again. A couple of hours ago he would've killed for this chance. Now he let it pass. "Don't you have to go to school for that?" He waved vaguely toward downtown.

"Probably. I don't know. Never mind." She picked an armful off the rail of hanging clothes and carried them over to the big press. "It's just something I've been thinking about."

She didn't speak, sing, or hum for fifteen minutes. She just hurled clothes around like curses: yanked them onto the press, jerked down the cover, threw them onto hangers when they were done. Kaplan wheeled in a basket filled with dirty clothes from up front and parked it by the spotting bench. He beamed when he saw the long line of finished orders ready for bagging.

"I should've gotten you two together weeks ago." He rubbed his hands. "This is great; I really mean it. Look, it's been a tough day. Go ahead and finish up the shirts and you can knock off a half hour early."

Olive twills.

"Thanks, Louis," said Celeste. She watched him go with a lemon expression on her face. "Half an hour early? Shit, we should go home now. We've already done a hell of a day's work." Then she chuckled; Celeste wasn't built to pout. "Well, if you'll bag up the cleaning, I'll move over to shirts."

"Sure."

"You're an odd one, you know that, Henry? At first I thought that you didn't like me. Then Jerry said you didn't like anyone. But we talked today and you survived. My guess is that you're just shy."

He hung the last pair of pants.

"Mind if I ask you a question?"

He sighed.

"What are you doing after work?"

It had been three years since Henry had last ridden in a car—not since he first started having bad thoughts. Now he remembered why. The bus might be crowded and slow but it was safe as the living room couch. Cars were vicious. The streets seethed with tense, drunk, angry, worried, impatient drivers. They were lost, late, stuck in traffic, and their windshields kept fogging up. There was no place to park, some scut had just cut them off, so they screamed back at their radios. He could see them jittering behind the steering wheels of their weapons, feel the darkness inside him feasting on their anger.

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He should have known better than to disrupt the routines. The monster was back.

"It's because they think I'm their mother," said Celeste, who drove as if she were alone on the road. "For a cat, leaving a dead mouse in the middle of the kitchen floor is the best way to say 'I love you.' They can't understand why I'm not grateful. Probably think I'm crazy."

Her junker '82 Escort would have lost in a collision with a lunchbox. He grasped the shoulder belt with his left arm; his right hand crushed the armrest on the door. Something was happening.

"My mom used to say that there are two kinds of people in the world, cat people and dog people. But come to find out there're all kinds of people. Bird people, fish people, snake people, plant people, even petless people. Bet that's you. You don't strike me as the pet type."

He shook his head.

"See? So what does that mean? That you're not human?"

Riding a tuna wagon down the mean streets was bad enough, but what really spooked him was Celeste's driving. She was barely tall enough to see over the dashboard. He had never realized how big her hump was until he had watched her wiggle it into the tiny car. It forced her forward so that she seemed to be looking through the steering wheel at the road. Except she wasn't. She kept trying to make eye contact with him while she babbled about cats.

"Of course, Slippers leaves most of the little prizes, these days. Figaro isn't quite the mouser he used to be since the operation. They cut a tumor off his chest. Cost me two hundred dollars. So what about your dad? You didn't say whether he's covered by insurance or not."

"We're okay." Henry should never have told her that he always visited his dad on the way home from work. And then he should've realized what would happen when she'd asked what hospital he was in. And then he should've lied about the forty minute bus ride that got him there fifteen minutes before visiting hours ended. He and his dad did not have that much to say to one another anyway.

"Pick a lane, Grandma!" She swerved around a LeBaron with Alabama plates. "That's good, because a hospital bill can kill you faster than any peckerhead doctor. Believe me, it'd be cheaper for him to stay in the presidential suite at the Sheraton. Probably more fun. How is he taking it anyway? My mother died of lung cancer, which isn't surprising seeing as how she smoked like Pittsburgh. She was an okay mom, better than I deserved. But I'll tell you, she was a bitch at the end. It was really hard."

"He's drugged," said Henry. "Doesn't talk much."

She signaled for a left turn and the Escort rattled up the ramp onto

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the interstate. "See," she said. "Almost there. Dad will have a nice surprise." As the speedometer skulked toward seventy, Henry braced against the floorboards hard enough to leave footprints. "I think the worst of it was when she decided she had to find God before she died. She hadn't been within spitting distance of a church for forty years and the next thing I know she's a born-again Baptist. Three weeks later I buried her. Only I have to put up with this douchebag in a collar who throws dirt on her and talks about how she's eating bon-bons with Jesus in the Kingdom of God. And charging me fifty bucks for the privilege. You're not a believer, are you, Henry?"

Henry hesitated, fighting a bad thought. If he touched her now, she'd faint. He could whip the wheel over and they'd jump the median into the oncoming traffic. "I go to church every day," he said.

"Oh." She turned pale, as if he'd said his hobby was drowning kittens. "Me and my big mouth." She signaled for Exit 7. "Sorry. I guess I fucked up." At the bottom of the ramp, Memorial loomed like a giant's headstone. She pulled up to the main entrance. "See you tomorrow then. Sorry."

"Yeah." Henry bolted from the car before the monster ripped her hump off and stuffed it down her throat.

"You look like a bum." Roger West had been cranked into a semi-upright position and propped in his hospital bed with pillows. "You come in here again, you shave." Cancer had chewed on him until there was only the wrinkled brown pit of a man left. "Why're you here?" His eyes were bright with pain.

"I came to visit, Dad. I always come."

"Not before the pill, you don't. Time is it?"

Henry glanced at his watch. "Four-eleven."

"Jesus God, nineteen years until four-thirty. Go find the nurse, tell her I can't wait. Service stinks in this lousy hospital you stuck me in, kid. I keep begging them for the pill, but they don't bring me nothing." His fingers curled and scrabbled at the sheet. "Why am I here? I hate this."

"You're sick, Dad. The doctor brought you here to take care of you."

"That's right." He licked his lips. "Okay."

"The reason I'm early today is I didn't take the bus. I got a ride over."

His dad closed his eyes. He sounded like he was breathing through a straw; the arms that used to hold Henry were limp as wet cardboard. Henry sat beside the bed and gazed out the window. At least his dad had the view. The middle bed was empty. The privacy curtain was drawn around Mr. DeCredico's bed near the door.

"What she say?" His dad didn't open his eyes.

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"Who?"

"The nurse. My son's coming, don't you understand? I need my pill."

The room got very small then so Henry went to the hall. He leaned against the doorway and listened to the fluorescents hum. Down the hall someone was watching *Jeopardy*. The PA system chimed. He scuffed the carpet. It was gun barrel gray. The wallpaper was beige and shiny and easy to wash. Henry rubbed a hand through the stubble along his jaw. It wasn't a bad thought to want to kill Dad. He could do it with a pillow; he wouldn't even need the Beretta. Dad would be grateful for the favor. It'd be payback for everything he had done for Henry, bringing him up all by himself. But this was the only murder the monster didn't lust for and Henry didn't have the spunk to do it by himself. He went back in.

"You're early," his dad said. "You didn't get fired, did you?"

"No Dad, I told you, I got a ride with someone."

"A ride? With someone?"

The monster hated Celeste and, for the moment, so did Henry. She had done this to them by disrupting the routine. He should've taken the bus and his dad would've scarfed the pill and none of this mung would've happened.

"Time is it?"

"Almost four-thirty."

His dad's laugh sounded like a cough. There was a plant with long shiny leaves like swords that he had bought for his dad by the window. Snake plant, the florist had said. Nothing could kill it. Henry could see the interstate, the bridges and the river glittering like the road to heaven. His dad had a room with a view on the twelfth floor. All the fabric snobs in the worsted wool suits he cleaned would kill for the chance to sit behind a desk with a view like this.

"Know why I can't get a pill? I can't pay. If I still had a credit card, I could charge all the pills I need." He swallowed painfully. "I know what they're trying to do. They're hoping I'll get sick of the lousy service and leave. I should. Just go home."

"You're sick, Dad."

"Don't tell me that. You don't know what sick is. You get a runny nose, you take a day off. But I'm empty. Nothing inside me. At least the pills fill me up." His mouth hung open as he gasped for breath. "But they're not giving me mine because you sold the house. That's why I can't go home, isn't it? I get sick and you let them take everything. I built that house. Where's my furniture, Henry?"

"Take it easy, Dad. It's safe in the warehouse."

"You think I can live in some damn warehouse?"

"Don't swear. When you get out, we'll rent an apartment."

"I'm not getting out. You're just like the nurses. Here I'm dying and

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you want to wait until four-thirty. I don't know why I had you, you useless bum. We would've been better off buying a dog."

"Why Mr. West, good afternoon." The nurse carried a tray with a clear plastic cup of apple juice and a tiny paper cup with the pill. "You're early today." Her acrylic uniform dress was whiter than anything Henry had ever cleaned. There was so much pain in the room, it was hard not to touch her. He flashed on the monster hurling her through the window. There'd be stains on her uniform that would never come out.

"He wants his pill," he said.

"Of course he does, it's four-thirty."

"Don't mind him." Roger West lifted his head off the pillow. "He's having a rough day." He opened his mouth for the pill as if he were taking the sacrament.

Henry was dancing with the boom box. No more routines; it was finally happening. Guns 'N Roses was cranked to the bughouse level. He cradled the noise to his chest, balanced it across his shoulders like an electronic hump, swung it in a straight-arm loop over his head. Someone was out to get Axl Rose but he wasn't going to take it. Neither was Henry, not as long as Slash was allowed to perform brain surgery with a guitar. Henry's underwear was not as white as a nurse's uniform. He had pulled one sock halfway off. The bathtub was filling up.

He whirled into the bedroom, set the boom box on the nightstand and hurled himself at the unmade bed. He bounced up and sprang again. Again, three, five times, as if the mattress were the plane of sanity that he might crash through, if only he tried hard enough. The song ended, the next one was about drugs. Henry didn't need drugs; he was high on death. He punched the eject button, flung the tape across the room and carried the boom box to the shrine. The door was wide open.

He slapped the Talking Heads into the player and snatched the Beretta off the altar. *Wham!* No more Louis Farrakhan. *Wham!* Die, Robert DeNiro. But pretending wasn't enough anymore. He wanted to flash like he had when Phil had put a hand on him. He wanted to feel the gun kick when he pulled the trigger. While David Byrne was quavering about psycho killers, Henry decided to show the Beretta the rest of their nasty little apartment. The boom box came along for the ride. They turned off the water in the bathtub and changed channels on the TV and straightened the picture of Henry and Dad at the lake. They were on their way to the kitchen to look behind the paper towels under the sink when the phone rang. Qu'est-ce que c'est?

As soon as he turned off the music, he knew it was the hospital calling to tell him Dad had died. Henry had let him down, hadn't given him what he wanted. It rang five times, six. A hand he wasn't quite in control

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of trembled over the phone but did not pick up. *Ring*. He was crying. *Ring*.

"Hello," he said.

"Henry? This is Celeste."

Hail Mary, he thought, full of grace. "Yeah?"

"Hey look, I'm sorry for what I said this afternoon. You know, about religion and all. It's my problem, okay? It has nothing to do with you."

He dabbed at a tear running down his cheek. "Uh-huh."

"Anyway, I've been driving around ever since then, thinking about what a jerk I was and I just looked at my watch and saw that it was six-thirty and realized I was hungry and I'm just around the block from Angelina's and I was wondering . . . I was wondering if you liked pizza? Because I was thinking I'd spring for a large one with pepperoni or mushroom or extra cheese or whatever you want and bring it over and we could split it and then maybe I could convince you to forgive me for being such an idiot. I mean, it's okay if you're busy but . . ."

"Mushroom," said the monster.

Her squeal of delight made the speaker buzz. "Mushroom? All right! How about something to drink? Beer? Wine?"

"Carlo Rossi Pink Chablis."

"No problem. This is great, Henry. I knew you'd understand. This shouldn't take long; what if we say I'll be there around seven-fifteen. I mean if that's too soon, I can come later."

"Seven-fifteen," it said. "You know where I live?"

"Sure, 117 Queensberry, apartment 22. Jerry told me. See you then."

The monster hung up the phone and glanced around. The apartment needed some straightening up. Things needed to be put in their places. It stuck the gun in its belt and went out to the kitchen to check behind the paper towels.

The bed was made, the breakfast dishes were washed and put away, the living room floor was vacuumed, the door to the shrine was locked and the Beretta was loaded and stashed under a cushion of the couch. The sound of Henry's mewling for it to stop came as if from a great distance, as it opened the door for its guest.

"Pouring out there." The rain had flattened Celeste's hair but hadn't washed away her smile. "It's a good night to stay home."

"Thanks for coming." It took the pizza box from her. "Come in." The top was soaked but the bottom was still hot.

"Ta-da!" She pulled a squat jug of wine from a paper bag. "Took me three stores to find it."

It hung her slicker over the bathtub and saw that she'd changed her clothes. She'd been wearing a red pocket tee and acid washed jeans under

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her work smock. Now she had on a ramie skirt that hung just above the knee and a fake batik polyester blouse—a smart choice of fabrics. You could get blood stains out of ramie, as long as they were fresh.

It had already decided not to rush. Now that it was in charge, there was no need to lunge; it could enjoy the moment. Besides, even monsters liked mushroom pizza and it hadn't eaten since lunch.

They sat at the kitchen table and tucked away all but a slice and drank sweet wine out of coffee cups while she babbled about crusts and exotic toppings and "Roseanne" and the high cost of mufflers and kitty litter. She asked what kind of movies it liked and it told her comedies but that its VCR was broken. She confessed to staying up too many late nights with horror flicks. Her favorite was the Nightmare on Elm Street series.

"Too violent for me." The monster couldn't help but notice that she was watching it like a movie. Her eyes never left its face. She was lit with an expression of fascinated suspense that got brighter and brighter with each cup of wine.

"The problem is," she was saying, "they're running out of ideas. You can watch just so many decapitations before you stop taking them seriously. Half the horror flicks these days play for laughs. The other half are about as scary as Count Chocula."

It offered the jug for a refill. She laughed and waved it away. "I've still got plenty left. You trying to get rid of it or what?"

"Maybe we should move to the couch?" It was excited now. "More comfortable there."

She stumbled coming out of her chair and it caught her, exercising so much restraint it thought it might burst.

" 'Scuse me," she said, her voice suddenly husky, "Hell of a lot drunker up here than I thought." She steadied herself with an arm around its waist and let it lead her down the hall. Her body was firm under her clothes; it could feel her heart pumping. "Where'd you say we were going?"

It steered her through the door. "You remember the living room?"

"Ah, yes. We were introduced earlier. Miss Lamp." She bowed. "Mr. TV. Mr. Table." She giggled and twisted around in a deft way that took it by surprise. She pressed closer and closer, arching up on tiptoes, stretching until their lips touched. Her tongue nipped against his teeth and she was kissing Henry, not the monster. When he realized he was back in control, he began to tremble.

"I know." She moaned softly and pushed him toward the couch. "Me too," she said. "But sit down first."

He slid as far away from the gun as he could and gaped as she unbuttoned her blouse.

"You probably think I do this all the time." She was wearing more

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underwear than he had expected. Her bra was white lace, sheer enough that he could see her nipples. Above it was a wide elastic harness made of ace bandages stitched together. He remembered the three piece bathing suit but he didn't laugh. Her skin frightened him. "Well, you're wrong," she said. "I don't get many requests and the ones that do ask are always perverts." She released three metal clips and the harness unwrapped itself and fell to the floor.

The hump on her back unfolded with a sound like hands rubbing together. Celeste grunted and twisted her head back and forth as if she had a crick. "No, it's all right," she said. "They just get a little stiff after being cooped up all day." She shook herself and two pointed masses of flesh dropped low behind her back and then slowly rose up past her shoulders.

She smiled shyly at him and beat her wings; he could feel air on his face. They were double-jointed; he could see outlines of bones that reminded him of posters of starving children.

"Oh my God," he said.

The skin stretched between the needle digits was the same color as her face, flushed an embarrassed red. He could see a filigree of arteries. She had a span of about four feet.

"Can you fly?"

She shook her head. "I'm afraid they're pretty useless." She giggled. "Except maybe as fans."

"I don't . . . this is . . . my God, Celeste." He shivered. "Can I touch them?"

"Mister, you can touch anything you want."

It was as if he was swimming across the room toward her. The wine burned in his belly like a pool of fire. She turned her back to him and held her wings still. They were covered with downy black hair and were hot as her lips. "Hey you, I'm standing here in my underwear and you're still dressed." She faced him. "Time to catch up." Her fingers tickled his chest as she took off his white shirt. She laughed drunkenly as she fumbled at his belt.

His legs went out beneath him and he sank to his knees. "Thank you, God." Now he knew he could beat the monster. "You've sent me an angel."

She grabbed a fistful of his hair and hauled him up.

"Listen, Henry." He had never seen her angry before. "I walked in here on my own two feet because you're the only man who never stared at me. Nobody pushed me in here, especially not God. There is no fucking God! Or if there is, he's got to be the most heartless asshole in the universe." Her wings were flapping like pennants. "You look at me. Go ahead. I'm a freak, a monster. I didn't ask to be one and I had to learn

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to live with these damn things. And nobody helped—my mother gave me this dumb name—I still haven't got any goddamn help. So if you want to thank somebody, you can thank Celeste Sloboda for staying sane despite the way most everyone stares." She was crying. "So that's the way it is, okay? I've pissed you off, you pissed me off and now we can go home and hate each other."

"Celeste." She could think whatever she wanted. He knew God's work when he saw it. She was full of a kind of pain the monster couldn't use. Only he could. He knew that as long as he believed in this miracle, nobody, nothing could stop him from being himself. "Let go of my hair?"

She released him and immediately stroked the back of his head. "I didn't mean to hurt you." Her gaze softened. "I'm sorry. I didn't want it like this."

He could feel the monster slipping away. "I want you," he said. Her face kept getting bigger until it was the only thing Henry could see. They kissed forever and amen. Henry wasn't sure how he got naked. As he led her to the bedroom he couldn't remember if any woman had ever seen him naked before.

She paused by the bathroom, traced the line of his chin, and smiled. "Henry," she said, "Do you think you might shave?"

Much later, he eased out from under the covers so as not to wake her. He realized where the monster had gone when it left him. He pulled on his jeans, padded into the living room and felt under the cushion. It was in the Beretta. His first thought was to lose it in the dumpster behind his apartment, but he was barefoot and it had set him back $538. Tomorrow after work he could pawn it and buy some nice woman thing for Celeste.

He stripped the magazine, picked the shells out, and wrapped everything in a green garbage bag. Or maybe he should keep the gun for protection. God knows there were monsters loose in the city. He hid it under the sink and snuck back to bed with his angel. ●

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THE SEX KITTEN 3000 SIMULATION GAME WITH SENSOR PADS

My parents hate her, I don't give a damn
if she's just an electric fantasy.
Can you get married to a hologram?

They say it's sensor pads and her program
that makes her touch feel like reality
My parents hate her, I don't give a damn.

I don't have to draw you a diagram
of what she does to curl my toes with glee.
Can you get married to a hologram?

They say they don't even know who I am
ever since they brought her home
on Christmas Eve.
My parents hate her, I don't give a damn.

I don't care if her passion is a scam,
I can't stop playing with her constantly.
Can you get married to a hologram?

It may be true that she is just a sham
but when she moves, she's real enough for me.
My parents hate her, I don't give a damn.
Can you get married to a hologram?

—William John Watkins

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DIE RACHE

by Steven Utley

Steven Utley's stories, nonfiction, and cartoons have appeared in numerous magazines (including *IAsfm, F&SF,* and *Ellery Queen),* anthologies, and newspapers. One of his most recent tales for *IAsfm,* "The Glowing Cloud," was our dramatic January cover story.

There is no pain at first, nothing that can be fixed in mind as being distinctly unpleasant, only a vague sense of tissues having been squeezed and stretched and pulled in all the wrong directions. There is something familiar about these sensations, something that frightens him. He tries to remember what is supposed to happen next.

Something *is* supposed to happen next, of this much he is certain. The harder he tries to remember, however, the more confused he becomes. Vivid but fragmentary impressions overwhelm him: the image of himself as a young child, eating black bread and cabbage soup in his mother's kitchen; the smell of wet shoes drying near the stove; the image of himself as an even younger child, nervously reciting his first lessons in numbers to his father, *eins, zwei, drei, vier, fünf;* faces like masks of stone, and his own voice, pleading. He tries to stop the rush of images, tries and fails and is borne by them to the old places, the old times.

There is a girl named Hilda who parts her great pale thighs and draws him into herself. There is a vast and unexpected sadness afterward.

There is the taste of ashes in the air, and he is clawing through the rubble, pulling out the pulped bodies, cursing the deadly efficiency of the enemy bombardiers, the ineffectual Luftwaffe, the shattered bricks and stones as they shred his gloves and tear his hands. *How many more times must I endure this?* he demands. *Haven't I suffered enough?* "Not nearly enough," someone murmurs.

A stone seems to sit in the pit of his stomach: now he is pushing bodies into the trench; the stench of putrefying flesh cuts through his cloth mask, forcing him to breathe as shallowly and as infrequently as possible. *God in Heaven,* he cries, *how many more times? When is this going to stop?* "When the scales are balanced," comes the reply.

The pain and horror suddenly swirl away. A great happiness settles

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upon him. All is right with the world now. He stands at attention, proud in the black uniform of the Schutzstaffel, his gaze fastened upon the dully gleaming coal-bucket helmet of the man in front of him. The very air shakes with a sound like the laughter of God as, on cue, he and all the others give joyous utterance to a shared sense of mission, of destiny, *sieg Heil! sieg Heil! sieg HEIL!* And then the laughter of God becomes mocking, becomes the yowling of sirens, the muffled reports of distant anti-aircraft batteries, and the maddening drone of the bombers as they pass above the city and methodically punch it into the earth. He huddles with the others in darkness deep under the city, softly moaning to himself, wincing as the shrill whine of falling bombs is first punctuated and then drowned out by explosions. The bombs are landing close now, too close, all around, seemingly right on top of him. Dust and flecks of stone drift down from the ceiling. Then the bombers move on, the explosions keeping pace.

"Do you know where you are?" someone says.

"Yes." He is in the bunker, waiting for the all-clear signal to be given. The taste and feel of dust is in his mouth, up his nose, on his face and hands. The man sitting beside him coughs. Somebody else sighs and makes a lame joke, and there is nervous laughter. It is good to be alive, he thinks, it is so very good to be alive. The hours pass slowly, however, and relief becomes restlessness. Somebody asks for and is angrily denied permission to smoke a cigarette. At last the Oberleutnant gives the order to go up. They ascend through pitch darkness and emerge into Hell. His own incredulous horror is reflected in the faces of his comrades as they survey the destruction. There is awe and fear in the Oberleutnant's muttered curse. There is the taste of ashes in the air. The ashes of the razed city. The ashes from the crematorium.

. . . the crematorium. He frowns. The images begin to warp. Perspective becomes distorted. But the crematorium was later, he thinks in panic. Much later and nowhere near the city, and again someone asks, "Do you know where you are?"

And then, so suddenly that he gives a wordless cry of alarm, his scrambled sensory perceptions sort themselves out. He is cold, and there are dull, throbbing aches in his marrow bones, the feel of needles under his skin. He can focus his eyes, and, hovering between him and the ceiling, there are faces like masks of stone. He can hear, and one of the faces speaks his name like a curse, spits it at him as though it tastes foul and brown on the tongue. He knows where he is and what this is: *die Rache*; the revenge. He begins to plead with the faces in a hoarse voice, "No more, please, no more. . . ."

"You know the charges," one of them says in flawless German. "You have been judged guilty. The sentence must be carried out."

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He groans and lies panting in the cold room, enduring the touch of their hands as they attend to his physical needs. There are no hesitations upon their part, nor is there urgency. Their precision and their imperturbability are machinelike. He says, "Monsters," and the word comes out a sob.

"But of course. We—" the speaker indicates herself and her three or four associates with a casual flick of her hand "—are indeed monstrous human beings. Not just anybody would be able to accommodate you in the manner you so richly deserve. Not just anybody would have the stomach for this. We are fiends in flesh, even as you."

"Even as *I*? This . . . this is *inhuman.*"

"This is necessary." The speaker's voice is cool and neutral. "By now you surely understand how it is. We are performing a long-overdue exorcism, driving out an old and terrible demon. We are laying ghosts to rest here. And you are absolutely necessary. You're the last one, the only one left in the entire world as far as we've been able to determine. The others, great and small, have been dead for many years now. This makes you extremely precious to us. Fortunately, with the technology at our disposal, you're also endlessly recyclable."

"I won't let you do this to me any more!"

"The sentence must be carried out. We have our mission. You have your destiny."

"Mission. Destiny." He remembers how the very air shook with a sound like the laughter of God. "How long is this nightmare going to last?"

"Until it's over and done with."

"It's been over and done with for more than *half a century!*"

"Nevertheless—"

"What can it *mean* to you? What difference can it make? You weren't even born then. You're hardly more than children now, how can you possibly *care?* And I, I wasn't important then, I was only a common soldier. I gave none of the orders. I committed no murders. I drove a tractor!"

"You dug graves and put bodies into them. You were there. You were part of it. Others may have issued the orders, others may have been responsible for policy, but they're dead and out of our reach. Someone has to pay. Someone has to put the scales in balance, and you're the only person left who can do that."

"I have *paid,* damn you! Paid, paid, *paid!*" He looks from face to face to impassive face. Masks of stone. "What do you *want?* How many more times can you *do* this to me before you're *satisfied?*"

The speaker shrugs and says, "Something fewer than ten million times now," and then they put him back to death for another day. ●

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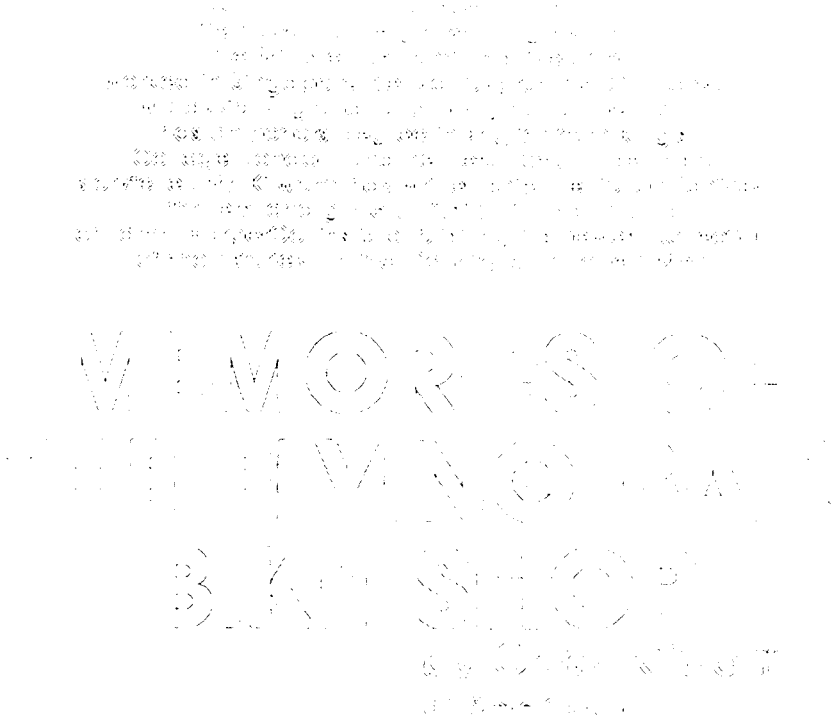

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The old Chinese gentleman was sitting cross-legged in the shadow of an alley. He was smoking a long bamboo pipe, which he cradled in the crook of his elbow. I had noticed him as we climbed the temple steps, and the image stayed with me as we wandered through the Buddhist-Tao shrine to Wong Tai Sin, a shepherd boy who had seen visions.

It was so hot the flagstones pulsed beneath our feet, but despite that David was impressed with the temple. We waded through the red-and-gold litter which covered the forecourt, the dead joss sticks cracking underfoot. Cantonese worshippers were present in their hundreds, murmuring orisons, rattling their cans of fortune sticks. Wong Tai Sin is no showcase for tourists, but a working temple in the middle of a high rise public housing estate. Bamboo poles covered in freshly washed clothes overhung the ornate roof, and dripped upon its emerald tiles.

The air was heavy with incense, dense enough to drug the crickets into silence. We ambled up and down stone staircases, admiring carvings the significance of which was lost in generations of western nescience, and gazed self-consciously at the worshippers on their knees as they shook their fortune sticks and prayed for lucky numbers to fall to the flagstones.

We left the temple with our ignorance almost intact.

The old man was still there, incongruous amongst the other clean-shaven Hong Kong men, with their carefully acquired sophistication, hurrying by his squatting form.

He had a wispy Manchu beard, long grey locks, and dark eyes set in a pomelo-skin face. A sleeveless vest hung from bony shoulders, and canvas trousers covered legs that terminated in an enormous pair of bare feet. The bamboo pipe he was smoking was about fifty centimeters long, three centimeters in diameter, with a large watercooled bowl at one end, and a stem the size of a drinking straw at the other. He had the stem in his lipless mouth, inhaling the smoke.

There was a fruit stall owner, a man I had spoken to on occasion, on the pavement nearby. I told David to wait by the taxi stand and went over to the vendor. We usually spoke to each other in a mixture of Cantonese and English, neither of us being fluent in the foreign language. He was fascinated by my red hair, inherited from my Scottish Highland ancestors.

"*Jo san,*" I said, greeting him, "*leung goh ping gwoh, m'goi.*"

I had to shout to make myself heard above the incredibly loud clattering coming from behind him, where sat three thin men and a stout lady, slamming down mah jong tiles as if trying to drive them through the formica table top.

He nodded, wrapped two apples in a piece of newspaper, and asked me for two dollars.

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Paying him, I said, "That man, smoking. Opium?"

He looked where I was pointing, smiled, and shook his head vigorously. "Not smoke opium. No, no. *Sik yin* enemy."

I stared at the old gentleman, puffing earnestly away, seeming to suck down the shadows of the alley along with the smoke.

"*Sik yin dik yan-aa?*" I said, wanting to make sure I had heard him properly. "Smoke *enemy?*"

"*Hai.* Magic smoke-pipe," he grinned. "*Magic,* you know? Very old *sik yin*-pipe."

Gradually I learned that the aged smoker had written down the name of a man he hated, on "dragon" paper, had torn it to shreds, and was inhaling it with his tobacco. Once he had smoked the name of his enemy, had the hated foe inside him, he would come to *know* the man.

The idea was of course, that when you knew the hated enemy—and by *know,* the Chinese mean to understand completely—you could predict any moves he might make against you. You would have a psychological advantage over him, be able to forestall his attacks, form countermoves against him. His strategy, his tactics, would be yours to thwart. He would be able to do nothing which you would not foresee.

"I think . . . " I began to say, but David interrupted me with a shout of, "I've got a taxi, *come* on!", so I bid the stall owner a hasty good-bye, and ran for the waiting vehicle. We leapt out into the fierce flow of Hong Kong traffic, and I put the incident aside until I had more time to think about it.

That evening, over dinner at the Great Shanghai Restaurant in Tsimshatsui, I complained bitterly to David about John Chang.

"He's making my life here a misery," I said. "I find myself battling with a man who seems to despise me."

David was a photographer who had worked with me on my old Birmingham paper. He had since moved into the big time, with one of the nationals in London, while I had run away to a Hong Kong English language newspaper, after an affaire had suffered a greenstick fracture which was obviously never going to heal.

David fiddled with his chopsticks, holding them too low down the shafts to get any sort of control over them. He chased an elusive peppered prawn around the dish. It could have still been alive, the way it evaded the pincers.

"You always get people like that, on any paper, Sean—you know that. Politicians, roughriders, ambitious bastards, you can't escape them just by coming east. Some people get their kicks out of stomping on their subordinates. What is he, anyway? Senior Editor?"

David finally speared the prawn with a single chopstick and looked

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around him defiantly at the Cantonese diners before popping it into his mouth.

"He's got a lot of power. He could get me thrown out, just like that."

"Well, suck up to the bastard. They like that sort of thing, don't they? The Chinese? Especially from European *gwailos* like you. Take him out to lunch, tell him he's a great guy and you're proud to be working with him—no, *for* him. Tell him the Far East is wonderful, you love Hong Kong, you want to make good here, make your home here. Tell the bastard anything, if it gets him off your back. Forget all that shit about crawling. That's for school kids who think that there's some kind of virtue in swimming against the tide. You've got to make a go of it, and this bloke, what's his name? Chang? If he's making your life hell, then neutralize the sod. Not many people can resist flattery, even when they recognize what it is—hookers use it all the time—'you big strong man, you make fantastic lovey, I never have man like you before.' Codswallop. *You* know it, *they* know it, but it *still* makes you feel good, doesn't it? Speaking of hookers, when are you going to take me down the Wanch . . . ?"

He was talking about Wan Chai, the red light district, which I knew I would have to point him towards one evening of his holiday. David liked his sex casual and stringless, despite all the evil drums in such a lifestyle these days. I needed emotion with my lovemaking, not cheap scent and garlic breath.

I lay in bed that night, thinking about what David had said. Maybe the fault did lie with me? Maybe I was putting out the wrong signals and John Chang thought I did not like him, had not liked him from our first meeting? Some men had sensitive antennae, picked up these vibrations before the signaller knew himself what messages he intended to transmit.

No, I was sure that wasn't it. I had gone out of my way to be friendly with John Chang. I had arrived in Hong Kong, eager to get to know the local people, and had seen John Chang as a person to whom I would have liked to get close. But from the beginning he had come down hard on me, on my work, on everything I did. I had been singled out for victimization, and he piled adverse criticism on my head whenever he got the chance.

However, I was willing to admit that I was not the easiest of employees to get along with, from a social point of view.

John Chang had a happy marriage. I had never met his wife, but she phoned him at the office quite often, and the tone and manner of the conversation indicated a strong loving relationship. This caused me to be envious of him. I once dreamed of having such a relationship with Nickie, and had failed to make it work. I still loved her, of course, and

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on days I missed her most I was testy and irritable with everyone, including John Chang.

I fell asleep thinking that perhaps I was more than partly to blame for John Chang's attitude toward me. I vowed to try to improve things, once my vacation was over and I was back at work.

There was a cricket making insistent noises, somewhere in the bedroom. It took several sleep-drugged minutes for me to realize that it was the phone chirruping. David? Had he gone down the Wanch and got himself into trouble?

"Hello, Sean Fraser . . . "

"Fraser?" John Chang's clipped accent. "Get down to the office. We need you on a story."

I sat up in bed.

"I'm on vacation. I've got a guest here, dammit!"

"Sorry, can't help that. Tim Lee's gone sick. He was covering the Governor's annual speech. You'll have to do it."

The line went dead. He had replaced the receiver.

I slammed the phone down and seethed for a few minutes, before getting out of bed to have a shower and get dressed. David was still asleep on the living room couch when I went through to the kitchen. I woke him and told him what had happened, apologized, and said I would see him that evening.

"Don't worry about me, mate. I can sort myself out. It's that bastard of a boss *you* want to sort out."

Once I had covered the usual bland yearly speech presented by the British Governor of Hong Kong—written by a committee into a meaningless string of words—John Chang wanted me to visit a fireman who lived in the Lok Fu district. The man had been partially blinded six weeks previously while fighting a fire in Chung King Mansions, a notorious giant slum where holidaying backpackers found relatively cheap accommodation in an impossibly expensive city.

"It's five o'clock," I protested to Chang, "and I have a guest to look after."

He regarded me stonefaced.

"You're a reporter. You don't work office hours."

"I'm on bloody holiday."

"That's tough. You cover this, *then* you're on vacation—unless I need you again. If you want to work for someone else, that's fine too. Understand me?" He stared hard at me, probably hoping I would throw his job in his face. I was not about to do that.

I said coldly, "I understand."

I rang David and said I would be home about nine o'clock. I advised

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him to go out and eat, because I was going to grab some fast food on my way to Lok Fu. He seemed happy enough, and told me not to worry, but that wasn't the point. The point was that I was close to strangling John Chang with my bare hands.

I saw the young fireman. He seemed philosophical about his accident, though to me his disability pension seemed incredibly small. His wife was working as a bank clerk and now he could look after their two infants, instead of sending them to the grandparents for the weekdays. He could still see a little, and as he pointed out, government apartments, like most private apartments in Hong Kong, were so small it had only taken him a short while to get a mental picture of his home.

During the interview the fireman pressed brandies upon me, as is the custom amongst the Hong Kong Chinese. By the time I left him, I was quietly drunk. I caught a taxi. The driver took me through Wong Tai Sin, and I passed the temple David and I had visited the previous evening. On impulse I told the driver to stop and paid him off.

The old man was still there, at the opening to the alley. He was sitting on a small stool, staring dispassionately at passersby with his rheumy eyes. The pipe was lying on a piece of dirty newspaper, just behind him. I stumbled over to him, trying to hide my state of inebriation.

I pointed to the pipe.

"*Ngoh, sik yin-aa?*" I said, asking to smoke it.

Cantonese is a tonal language, the same words meaning many different things, and by the way he looked at me I knew I had got my tones wrong. I had probably said something like "Me fat brickhead" or something even more incomprehensible.

"*M'maai,*" he said emphatically in Cantonese, thinking I wanted to buy the pipe and informing me that it was not for sale.

I persisted, and by degrees, got him to understand that I only wanted to smoke it. I told him I had an enemy, a man I hated. I said I wished "to know" this man, and would pay him for the use of his magic pipe. He smiled at me, his face a tight mass of contour lines.

"*Yi sap man,*" he agreed, asking me for twenty dollars. It was a very small sum for gaining power over the man that was making my life a misery.

I tore off a margin piece of newspaper and wrote JOHN CHANG on it, but the old man brushed this aside. He produced a thin strip of red-and-gold paper covered on one side with Chinese characters and indicated that I should write the name on the back of it. When I had done so, he tore it into tiny pieces. I could see the muscles working in wrists as thin as broom handles, as his long-nailed fingers worked first at this, then at tamping down the paper shreds and tobacco in the pipe bowl.

He handed the musty-smelling instrument to me and I hesitated. It

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looked filthy. Did I really want that thing in my mouth? I had visions of the stem crawling with tuberculosis bacilli from the spittle of a thousand previous smokers. But then there was a flame at the bowl, and I was sucking away, finding the tobacco surprisingly smooth.

I could see the dark smoke rising from the rubbish burning cauldrons of Wong Tai Sin Temple, and as I puffed away on the ancient bamboo pipe, an intense feeling of well-being crept over me. I began to suspect the tobacco. Was it indeed free of opium? Had I been conned, by the fruit seller and the old man both? Maybe the old man was the fruit stall owner's father? It didn't seem to matter. I liked the pair of them. They were wonderful people. Even John Chang seemed a nice man, at that moment in time.

When the holiday was over, David left Hong Kong, and I returned to work. John Chang was in a foul mood the morning I arrived, and was screaming at a young girl for spilling a few drops of coffee on the floor. A woman reporter caught my eyes and made a face which said, "Stay out of his way if you can."

The warning came too late.

"You," snapped John Chang, as I passed him. "That fireman story was bloody useless. You didn't capture the personal side *at all.*"

"I thought I did," I said stiffly.

"What you think is of no interest to me. I asked you to concentrate on the man and his family, and you bring in all that rubbish about government pensions."

"I thought it needed saying."

He gave me a look of disgust and waved me away as if I were some coolie who was irritating, but not worth chastising further. I felt my blood rise and I took a step toward him, but Sally, the woman reporter, grabbed my arm. She held me there until John Chang had left the room.

I turned, the fury dissipating, and said, "Thanks."

She gave me a little smile.

"You would only be giving him the excuse he needs," she said in her soft Asiatic accent. Peter Smith, another reporter, said, "Too bloody right, mate. Don't give him the satisfaction."

"He looked as if he could have killed that girl," I said to Sally, a little later. "All over a few spots of coffee."

"It was her perfume. For some reason that brand drives him crazy. I used to wear it myself, but not any more. Not since I realized what it does to his temper . . . "

Understand the one you hate.

I had to admit my temporary drunken hopes for a magical insight into

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John Chang had failed. There was no magic on the modern streets of Hong Kong. An antique pipe, nicotined a dirty yellow, stained black with tobacco juice, dottle clinging to the bowl, was nothing more than what it was—a lump of wood. Had I really believed it would help me?

I guess a desperate man will believe anything, even that he will some day manage to forget a woman he loves: will wake up one morning free of her image, the sound of her voice in his head gone, her smell removed from his olfactory memory. Memory sometimes works to its own secret rules and is not always subject to the will of its owner.

Memories can be cruel servants.

I began to have strange dreams, even while awake, of a woman I did not know. She was small, slim and dark, with a familiar voice. We were very intimate with one another. I pictured her in a kitchen, her hands flying around a wok, producing aromas that drove my gastric juices crazy. I saw her brown eyes, peering into mine from behind candles like white bars, over a dining-room table made of Chinese rosewood. There was love in those eyes. We drank a wine which was familiar to my brain but not to my tongue. She chattered to me, pleasantly, in Cantonese. I understood every word she said.

These pictures, images, dreams, began to frighten me a little, not because they were unpleasant, but because they felt comfortable. They worried me with their coziness. I wondered whether they were some kind of replacement for the memories that I was attempting to unload: the result of a compensatory mental illness. Perhaps I was trying to fill emotional gaps with strange fantasies of a Chinese woman.

I began to look for her in the street.

There were other, more disconcerting thoughts, which meant very little to me. Scenes, cameos, flashes of familiar happenings that meant nothing to me emotionally. I pictured myself going into stores and shops I did not recognize, for articles I had never even considered buying. There was an ambivalence to my feelings during these scenes. I saw myself buying an antique porcelain bowl, the design of which I instinctively and intensely disliked. Yet I purchased it with loving care and a knowledge of ceramics I had not previously been aware of possessing. In another scene, I went into a bakery and bought some Chinese moon cakes, a highly sweetened, dense foodstuff which most *gwailos* avoid, and I was no exception.

I was sure I was going quite mad.

John Chang kept me busy, hating him. He did not let up on me for one moment during the sweltering summer months, when the wealthy fled to cooler climes and school teachers blessed the long vacations they got during the season when Hell relocated to the Hong Kong streets.

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During this humid period the Chinese lady with the loving eyes continued to haunt me. I would languish at my desk after work, reluctant to leave the air conditioned building, picturing myself making love with this woman in a bed with satin sheets, surrounded by unfamiliar furniture. It seemed right. Everything about it seemed right, except when I questioned it with some other part of my mind, the part firmly based in the logic that said *you do not know this woman.* It was true. I had never met anyone like her, yet she looked at me as if I were hers, and some unquestioning area of my mind, less concerned with what I *knew,* and content to be satisfied with what I *felt,* told me yes, this had happened, this was a proper interpretation of my experiences.

I began to read about schizophrenia, wondering whether I was one of those people who have more than one personality, but the books that I read did not seem to match what was happening to me. I balked when it came to seeing a therapist. I was afraid there was something quite seriously wrong with me.

In October, some people organized a junk trip to Lamma Island, the waterfront of which is lined with excellent fish restaurants. Sally asked me if I was going and I said I might as well. Most of the newspaper's employees would be there, and a few of the employers as well. The weather had turned pleasantly hot, had left the dehumanizing summer humidity behind in September. It promised to be a good evening.

There were rumors that John Chang would be going, but that did not deter me. I wondered if I could get drunk enough to tell him what I thought of him.

I was one of the last to jump aboard the junk, which then pulled out into the busy harbor. I stared at the millions of lights off to port: Causeway Bay, Wan Chai and Central, resplendent during the dark hours. A beer was thrust into my hand. I drank it from the can and looked around me. Sally was there. She waved. Peter Smith stood in animated conversation with another of our colleagues, his legs astride to combat the rolling motion of the craft in the choppy harbor waters. Then I noticed John Chang, sour-faced, standing by the rail.

Beside him was a lady I had never seen before, not in the flesh, but a woman with whom I had made love, in my head, a thousand times. My heart began to race and I felt myself going hot and cold, alternately, wondering whether I should try to hide somewhere until the evening was over. If she sees me, I thought, she's bound to recognize me as the one . . .

Then I pulled myself up short. One *what?* What had I done to her? Nothing. Not a blessed thing. So where did these pictures come from that had invaded my head? The best way to find out was to talk to her. I tried

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to catch her eyes, hoping she would come over to me without bringing John Chang.

Eventually I captured her attention and she looked startled. Did she know me after all? Was I indeed living some kind of Jekyll and Hyde existence? It was only after a few minutes that I understood she was not staring into my face at all: it was my red hair that had her attention. Then she realized she was being rude and averted her gaze, but Chang had caught us looking at each other and motioned for her to cross the deck with him. Before I could turn away, he was standing in front of me, gesturing towards the woman at his side.

"I don't believe you've met my wife, have you Fraser?"

She spoke in a gentle tone, admonishing him.

"John, Mr. Fraser must have a first name?"

He looked a little disconcerted.

"Yes, of course," he said stiffly. "Sean. Sean Fraser. Scottish I think."

"My ancestors were," I blurted, "but we've lived south of the border for two generations. The red hair, you know, is proof of my Celtic origins. I'm still a Scot, in spirit."

I shook her hand, acutely embarrassed by the fact that I knew what she looked like naked, lying on the bed, waiting for me to press myself against her. *John Chang's wife.* There were two small brown moles under her left breast. There were stretch marks around her abdomen.

I felt the silkiness of her palm, knowing that soft touch. I remembered the time she had whispered urgent nonsense into my ear, the first time our orgasms had coincided exactly, a miracle of biology which had left us breathless for several minutes afterwards, when we had both laughed with the utter joy of the occasion.

Staring into her eyes, I knew that if there was a memory of such happenings, they did not include *me*. What I saw there was a terrible sadness, held in check by a great strength. Alice Chang was one of those splendid people who find a natural balance within themselves. When a negative aspect of life causes them to lose equilibrium, a positive one rises from within their spirit, to meet it, cancel it out.

"I'm very pleased to meet you, Alice," I said.

"Oh, you know my name." She laughed. "I thought John tried to keep me a secret. Do you know this is the first time he has allowed me to meet his colleagues?"

I looked quickly at John Chang, and then said, "I'm afraid I've heard him speaking to you on the phone. The office has good acoustics. I don't eavesdrop intentionally."

"I'm sure you don't," she said, and then he steered her away, towards one of the directors, leaving me sweating, holding onto the rail for support. Not because of the rocking motion of the boat, but because my legs felt weak.

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The following weekend I took a boat trip to Lantau Island and sat at a beach restaurant, staring at the sea and sand. I needed a peaceful place to think. Hong Kong's national anthem, the music of road drills, pile drivers, traffic, buzz saws, metal grinders *et al* was not conducive to reflective thought.

There were evergreens along the shoreline of Silvermine Bay, decorated with hundreds of tattered kites. The children used the beach to fly their toys, which eventually got caught in the branches of the large conifers, and remained there. The brightly-colored paper diamonds gave the firs the appearance of Christmas trees. Around the trunks of the kite-snatchers were dozens of bicycles, chained to each other for security, left there by adolescents now sprawled on the sands.

I had managed to engineer one more chat with Alice Chang, before the end of that evening on Lamma, and spoke about the antique porcelain bowl, describing it. I had to lie to her, telling her that John had spoken to me about it, seemed proud to be its owner.

"Oh, yes. He loves ceramics, you know. It's his one expensive hobby."

I knew now I was experiencing John Chang's memories.

It was nothing to do with me. I had not made love to Alice Chang, but I carried John Chang's memories of such occasions, those that he wished to recall, and some he did not. It was a disturbing ordeal. There was a grim recollection of being hit a glancing blow by a truck, when he was small, and another when he was falsely accused of stealing from his school friends. I was gradually getting "to know" my Chinese boss and there were some dark areas in there which terrified me. I woke up at night, sweating, wondering where the fear was coming from, what was causing the desire to scream.

The night after the junk trip, I had spoken to Sally.

"How many kids has John Chang got?" I asked her casually.

She shook her head.

"None, so far as I know. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, no reason. I met his wife, last night. I thought she mentioned something about a child, but I couldn't be sure. I suppose I must have been mistaken."

Sally said, "I'm positive you are.".

I drank steadily, as I tried to puzzle through my jumbled memories of his early marriage, and my eyes kept being drawn towards the bicycles, chained to the tree trunks. I struggled with a black beast of a memory, which was utterly reluctant to emerge from a hole it had dug itself.

A bicycle.

This was the key, but something prevented me from opening the lock. There was the idea that a bicycle was a detested thing, a deadly, ugly

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machine that should be outlawed, banned from use. *People who sell bicycles should be prosecuted, imprisoned, hung by the neck . . .*

That was very strong, *very* strong.

One of the kids from the beach came and unlocked her bike, climbed into the saddle, and rode away along the path. I experienced a forceful desire to scream at her, tell her to get off, return the machine to the salesman.

Where?

A shop sign popped into my head, which read: THE FLYING BALL CYCLE CO.

Then that dark cloud extended itself from the back of my brain, blacking out anything that might have followed.

Back at the flat I received a surprise telephone call from England. From Nickie. She asked me how I was. Did I like the Far East? Yes, she was fine. She was seeing one or two people (she didn't call them men) and things were absolutely fine.

Her voice was recognizably thin and tight, even over the phone. There was great anger there, pressing against her desire to sound casual. I noticed that it was 3 o'clock in the morning, her time, and I guessed she had been unable to sleep, obsessed with relentlessly reviewing the bitter times, furious with herself for failing to retaliate strongly, when something hurtful had been said, wishing she could raise the subject again, but this time be the one to wield the knife, cut the deepest.

I knew how she felt, having gone through the same cycle, many nights. We had both fired words, intended to wound, but we both remembered only being hit.

I told her I was having some trouble with one of my bosses. She sympathized coldly, but what she had really called about was the fact that I still had two of her favorite poetry books. She would like them back again, please, the Hughes and the Rilke.

Oh, those, yes, but three o'clock in the morning?—she really must want them badly, I said. I told her I remembered seeing them, just before leaving England for Hong Kong, but could not put my hand on them at this time. Could she call again later, when I had done some more unpacking?

No, she couldn't. I had been in Hong Kong for nearly a year. Hadn't I unpacked my things *yet?*

Her words became more shrill as the anger seeped through like a gas, altering the pitch of her voice.

When I did manage to unpack, could I please post them back to her? Yes, she was aware they were only paperbacks and could be replaced,

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but she didn't see why she should buy new copies when she already owned some—good-bye.

The emptiness that filled the room, after she had put down the phone, would have held galaxies.

I tried not to hate her, but I couldn't help it. She was there, I was here. Thousands of miles apart.

I picked up the Rilke, from the bedside table, open at *Orpheus. Eurydice, Hermes.* It was pencil marked in the margins, with her comments on the text. It was her handwriting I had been reading, not Rilke's poem. The flourishes were part of her, of the woman I had loved, and I had been sentimentalizing, as well as studying them for some small insight into her soul. I wanted to understand her, the secret of her self, in order to discover *why*. Why had it gone wrong?

The terrible ache in me could not be filled by love, so I filled it with hate instead. I wanted to kill her, for leaving me, for causing me so much emotional agony. I wanted to love her. I wanted her to love me. I hated her.

On Monday afternoon, I cornered Peter Smith. I recalled that he used to cover cycling stories for the paper. At one time his speech had been full of jargon—*accushift drivetrains, Dia-Compe XCU brakes, oversized headsets, Shimano derailleurs.* The language of the initiated, for the enthusiasts.

"You're a bike fanatic," I said. "You cycle in New Territories, don't you?"

"Not so much now," he patted a growing paunch, "but I used to. Why, you looking for a sport to keep you fit?"

"No, I came across this guy who kept raving about the Flying Ball Bike Shop. Know it?"

Smith laughed.

"My boy, that shop is a legend amongst cyclists. You can write to the owner of the Flying Ball from any corner of the earth, and he'll airmail the part you need and tell you to pay him when you eventually pass through Hong Kong."

"Why *Flying Ball?* Is that some kind of cog or wheel bearing invented specifically for push bikes?"

Smith shook his head.

"I asked the owner once. He told me the shop had been named by his grandfather, and he forgot to ask the old man what it meant. The secret's gone with grandpa's polished bones to a hillside grave overlooking water. Part of the legend now."

"Where is it? The shop, I mean."

"Tung Choi Street, in the heart of Mong Kok," he said, "now buzz off, I've got a column to write."

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I went back to my desk. A few moments later I experienced a sharp memory pang and looked up to see the office girl placing a polystyrene cup of steaming brown liquid on my desk top. She smiled and nodded, moving on to Sally's desk. I could smell her perfume. It was the same one she had been wearing the day John Chang had bawled at her.

It was twilight when I reached Tung Choi Street. Mong Kok is in the Guinness Book of Records as the most densely populated area on the face of the earth. It is teeming with life, overspilling, like an ants' nest in a time of danger. It is rundown, sleazy, but energetic, effervescent. Decaying tenements with weed-ridden walls overhang garage-sized factory-shops where men in dirty T-shirts hammer out metal parts for everything and anything: stove pipes, watering cans, kitchen utensils, car exhausts, rat cages, butter pats, fish tanks, containers, and so on. What you can't buy ready-made to fit, you can have knocked up within minutes.

Over the course of the day, the factory-shops vomit their wares slowly out across the greasy pavement, into the road. The vendors of fruit and iced drinks fill in the spaces between. Through this jungle of metal, wood, and plastic plough the taxis and trucks, while the pedestrians manage as best they can to hop over, climb, circumnavigate. Business is conducted to a cacophony caused by hammers, drills, saws, car horns. It can have a rhythm if you have a broad musical tolerance and allow it flexibility.

THE FLYING BALL CYCLE CO.

I found the shop after two minutes' walking.

I stood on the opposite side of the road, the two-way flow of life between me and this unimposing little bike shop, and I remembered. It hit me with a force that almost had me reeling backwards, into the arms of the shopkeeper amongst whose goods I was standing. The dark area lifted from my brain, and the tragedy was like an awful light, shining through to my consciousness. The emotional pain revealed by this brightness, so long covered and now unveiled, was appalling.

And this was not my agony, but *his*.

I turned and stumbled away from the scene, making for the nearest telephone. When I found one, I dialed John Chang's home number. It had all come together the moment I laid eyes on the Flying Ball: the hate John Chang bore towards me; the unexplained stretch marks on Alice Chang's abdomen; the blankness in his eyes, the sadness in hers.

"Mrs. Chang? This is Sean Fraser. We met on the junk—yes, the other night. I wonder if you could ask John to meet me, in the coffee shop by Star Ferry? Yes, that's the one. Can you say it's very important. It's about your son, Michael . . . Yes, I know, I know, but I have to talk to him just the same. Thanks."

I put down the receiver and hailed a taxi.

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I was on my second cup of coffee when he arrived. He looked ashen and for once his façade of grim self-assurance was missing. I ordered him a cup of coffee and when it arrived, put some brandy in it from a half-bottle I had bought on the way. He stared at the drink, his lean face grey, his lips colorless.

"What's all this about?" he said. The words were delivered belligerently, but there was an underlying anxiousness to the tone. "Why did you ask me to come here, Fraser?"

He hadn't touched his coffee, and I pushed it towards him.

"I know about Michael," I said.

His eyes registered some pain.

"I know how he died."

"What business is it of yours?" he said in a low voice. "How dare you? You're interfering in my family affairs. You leave my family alone."

"I'm not interested in your family. I'm interested in the way you treat *me*. Since I've been in Hong Kong, you've made my life hell. I didn't bring your family into the office, *you* did. You're punishing me for something you won't even allow yourself to think about. You've blocked it out and the guilt you feel is causing you to hurt other people, especially red-headed *gwailos*.

"I've been the target for your suppressed anger, your bottled grief, for as long as I can stand. It's got to stop, John. I'm not responsible for Michael's death, and you know it, really. I just happen to be a European with red hair. I wasn't even in Hong Kong when that driver took your son's life . . . "

"Shut up!" he shouted, causing heads to turn and look, then turn back again quickly. His face was blotched now with fury, and he was gripping the cup of coffee as if he intended to hurl it into my face.

"This is what happened, John," I said quietly, ignoring his outburst. "It was Christmas, and, being a Christian, you celebrated the birth of Christ in the way that *gwailo* Christians do. You bought presents for your wife and twelve-year-old son. You gave your wife some perfume, a brand you won't allow her to use now because it reminds you of that terrible time, and you asked your son what he would like most in the world . . . "

There were tears coming down John Chang's face now, and he stumbled to his feet and went through the door. I left ten dollars on the table and followed him. He was standing against the harbor wall, looking down into the water, still crying. I moved up next to him.

"He said he wanted a bicycle, didn't he, John? One of those new mountain bikes, with eighteen, twenty gears. You took Michael down to Mong Kok, to the Flying Ball Bike Shop, and you bought him what he wanted because you were a loving father, and you wanted to please him. He then

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begged to be allowed to ride it home, but you were concerned, you said no, repeatedly, until he burst into tears—and finally, you relented.

"You said he could ride it home, if he was very, very careful, and you followed behind him in the car."

I paused for a moment and put my arm around his shoulders.

"The car that overtook you, halfway home, was driven by a red-headed foreigner, a *gwailo,* and he hit Michael as he swerved in front of you to avoid an oncoming truck. The bike itself was run over. It crumpled, like paper, and lay obscenely twisted beside your son's body. You stopped, but the other driver didn't. He sped away while you cradled Michael's limp body in your arms, screaming for an ambulance, a doctor.

"They never caught the hit-and-run driver, and you've never forgiven yourself. You still want him, don't you, that murdering red-headed *gwailo,* the man who killed your son? You want to punish him, desperately, and maybe some of that terrible guilt you feel might go away."

He turned his tear-streaked face toward me, looked into my eyes, seeking a comfort I couldn't really give him.

I said gently, "That wasn't me, John. You know it wasn't me."

"I know," he said. "I know, I know. I'm so sorry."

He fell forward, into my arms, and we hugged each other, for a brief while. Then we became embarrassed simultaneously, and let go. He went back to leaning on the wall, but though the pain was still evident, his sobbing had ceased.

Finally he turned, asked the obvious question: how did I know so much detail about Michael's death? It had happened many years ago.

Rather than go into the business with the pipe, I told him I had been to Wong Tai Sin, to a clairvoyant, and the man had looked into John's past for me.

"It cost me a lot of money," I said, to make it sound more authentic. If there's one thing that Hong Kongers believe in, it's the authority money has to make the impossible possible. John Chang did not laugh at this explanation or call me a liar. A little brush with the West does not wipe out five thousand years of Chinese belief in the supernatural.

Then he went home, to his wife, leaving me to stare at the waters of the fragrant harbor and think about my own feelings of love and hate. *Understand the man you hate.* How can you hate a man you understand? I began to realize what the old man with his magic pipe was selling. Not power over one's enemy. Love. That's what he had for sale. His was a place where you could look at hate, understand it enough to be able to turn it into love.

I knew something else. Now that I had confronted John, now that we understood one another, the memories of his past would cease to bother me. The pipe had done its work.

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* * *

The following week, one evening when a rain as fine as Irish drizzle had come and gone, leaving a fresh scent to the air, I took a taxi to Wong Tai Sin Temple. The old man was still there, sitting at the entrance to the alley, his pipe by his side.

I went up to him and gave him twenty dollars, and he smiled and silently handed me the pipe and a piece of red-and-gold paper decorated with Chinese characters.

On the back of the paper I wrote the name of a person I loved and hated—NICHOLA BLACKWOOD—and tore it into tiny pieces, hoping that distance was no barrier to magic.●

NEXT ISSUE

One of our most popular writers returns to these pages next month, as **Lucius Shepard** brings us a big, brawling new novella, our July cover story, the vivid and compelling story of "Barnacle Bill the Spacer." In this one, Lucius takes us to a troubled space colony at the far reaches of the solar system, where humanity is groping for a foothold to the stars—*if* they can survive some sinister threats from Old Earth, *and* from within their own hearts. This is an intense, fast-paced, and fascinating story of terrorism, corporate intrigue, and cultural evolution, of love, betrayal, and redemption, told as only Lucius could tell it. Don't miss it!

ALSO IN JULY: hot new Australian writer **Greg Egan** gives us an unsettling and brilliantly original study of just what it is that makes us human, in the powerful "Dust"; Hugo-winner **Mike Resnick** returns with a sharp demonstration of how even the biggest of lives can turn on the smallest of details, in "The Light That Blinds, the Claws That Catch"; **Patricia Anthony** spins a hair-raising tale of a simple bus ride home, in the chilling "Blue Woofers"; **Steven Utley** returns with a bizarre and bittersweet love story in "Now That We Have Each Other"; new writer **Tony Daniel** takes us on a wild and dangerous adventure through the Pacific Northwest, as cosmic forces in conflict fight it out in a sleepy little town, with the destiny of the world at stake, when "The Careful Man Goes West"; and new writer **Greg Costikyan** returns with a gentle fantasy that gives us an evocative sketch of "A Doe, in Charcoal." Plus an array of columns and features. Look for our July issue on sale on your newsstands on May 26, 1992.

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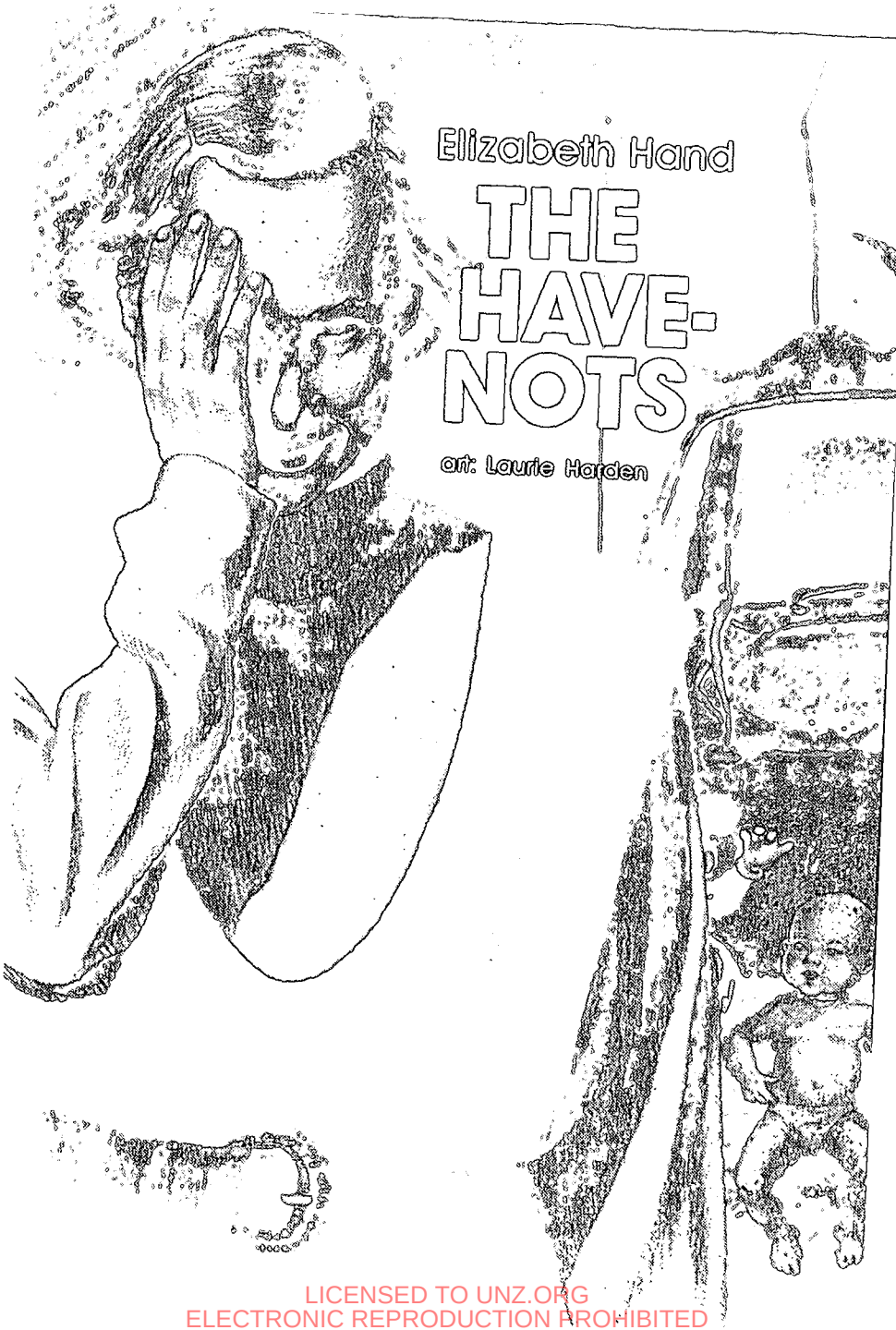
Elizabeth Hand

THE HAVE-NOTS

art: Laurie Harden



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Now you know Eddie Rule came and took that baby girl three days after she was born.

Actually, his mother took her, Nora Margaret. That was his mother's name, not the girl's. Marched right into that hospital room, Loretta said the nurse was checking her stitches Down There and Nora Margaret marched right in anyway, didn't give a tinker's dam.

I'm taking that baby, she said.

Pardon me? said the nurse. She didn't know Nora Margaret Rule from a hole in the ground.

Excuse *us*, she told the nurse, I think you better go now.

The hell you will, said Loretta; at least now that's what she says she said, but I knew Loretta since fourth grade and she never said a swear in her life 'til she met Eddie Rule, and let me tell you, he was such a goddamn son of a bitch, pardon my French, I would of swore too.

Now, Alice Jean honey, let me explain something. That shade is just all wrong for you. You're a Summer Rose, remember, you got that blonde hair and blue eyes, you just *have* to go with the Love That Pink. That's the wonder of Mary Rose Cosmetics, everyone gets their own special coordinated color. I think the Salmon Joy is for Erika here, now see the difference?

I thought you would.

Now I'm sorry, I got distracted. But Loretta says now she should of told Nora Margaret off like that, anyhow, swears or not, and I wish she had.

We're married, Loretta said. Ask that nurse, she saw it, Mr. Proctor came down and did it before the baby came. The nurse was gone by then but Loretta showed me the license, it was real all right, she's still got it at home. They wanted to see it for the movie.

Well you ain't married no more, says Nora Margaret. Loretta told me later, she was surprised a rich lady'd talk like that, but I told her Nora Margaret Rule had no more schooling than my dog King, she just married a rich man is all. Anyway she flaps some paper in front of Loretta's face, Loretta practically went into hysterics then and they called the doctor in. She got them to annex the marriage—

Pardon?

Oh. Well, whatever. Annul it, then, she went to court and had them fix it somehow, said cause her son is a Catholic and there was no priest it wasn't a real marriage. Loretta said if you're a Christian how come you're taking my baby and I'm gonna call the police.

Catholic, not Christian, Nora Margaret says, and don't waste your breath, Miss Missy.

Loretta says, it's *Missus*, and Nora Margaret says, Not anymore it ain't. And you know she really did, she took that little baby practically

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out of her mama's arms and took it away. Paid somebody to adopt it in Richmond and that was the last Loretta saw of it.

Erika, honey, I swear that color takes ten years off your life. Not that you need it. I swear. Alice Jean, don't you think so? I love it that we can compare like this, friends at home. That's why I love Mary Rose Cosmetics, I can come right here to your house with everything and then later, in the middle of the night, you change your mind, why next day I can come right back and you can exchange that Salmon Joy for anything you like.

That Touch of Teal is *very* popular this year, Erika, you just go right ahead and try it. Kind of smudge it around your eyelid like that. There. I sold one to Suzanne Masters last week, she had that dinner dance at the club to go to and it just matched her dress. I told her if I keep going like this, I'm gonna have that Mary Rose Cadillac by the end of summer and drive my kids to school in it.

I haven't forgotten I'm telling about Loretta's Cadillac, Alice Jean. You get too impatient. Let me give you a facial massage and masque, you got that hot water there Erika? All right. Now this only takes a few minutes but I swear you will feel like a new woman. You need to relax more, Alice Jean.

There. Isn't that nice? I think it smells like that shampoo they use at Fashion Flair.

So that was, what, Nineteen-fifty-six? Nineteen-fifty-six. Loretta got out of the hospital and I got her a job at the Blue Moon. Now I swear to god every small town and every city I ever lived in had a diner called the Blue Moon. But it wasn't a bad place to work, just not what you'd want to do after you were married for three days to a Catholic whose rude mama came into the hospital and stole your baby and then gave it to a chiropractor and his wife in Richmond. Plus Nora Margaret said she was gonna change the baby's name—

Her name is Eloise, Loretta shouted. Eloise LeMay Rule.

Not anymore it ain't, Nora Margaret yelled back.

So she's gone forever, Eloise or whatever her name was. Eddie Rule is gone too, his father sent him off to college; some place where they take people even if you got kicked out of high school without graduating and your mother's the kind of person says ain't. But let me tell you, it's an ill wind blows no one any good, cause Loretta hasn't seen him since then and that's the best thing ever happened to her. Good riddance to bad rubbish and I mean that. But of course she didn't feel like that then—

I love him, Terry! she'd tell me, and I'd say Sure, honey, you love him, but he's gone now and don't do you any good to moon over him. We all thought it best not to bring up the baby at all. Nowadays they wouldn't do that, they'd have her going to some kind of Group, like now Loretta's

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been going to AA, some place where'd they all talk about having their babies taken away. Like when Noreen was on Oprah, they had all these people claimed to have seen him since he died—

Well all right, Alice Jean, I *am* getting to it. Let me put some more warm water there—

Well I'm sorry, was that too hot? I'm sorry, honey, I surely am. Erika, see if there's any ice there, will you?

All right. So we're at work one day, this is still at the Blue Moon, and *he* comes in. The Colonel was with him, we recognized The Colonel first cause of he's wearing this big hat, but let me tell you, it didn't take us more than a New York second to recognize Him. He was famous then but it wasn't like later, he could still walk around like a regular person.

My god he's a handsome man, said Loretta. Sweet Jesus he sure is.

Yup, I said. I was Manageress-in-Training so I had to be more professional, though that was a dead-end job too. Doing this Mary Rose thing is the best thing ever happened to me, God strike me if that isn't the truth. Erika, if you're still interested you let me know, cause I get extra points for signing up new people and it all goes towards the You-Know-What.

The one they had you wouldn't believe. One of the other girls saw it and told us, Look outside, and we did and there it was. Looked like it took up the whole parking lot, and that was before they opened the Piggly Wiggly next door.

Holy cow, said Loretta. That's the biggest goddamn Cadillac I ever saw. Pardon my French, I told you she started talking like that after Eddie. But she was right, it *was* a big car—but you all've seen it, least you saw it the way Loretta had it. Sure you have, oh Erika honey, thank you—

Alice Jean, I *am* telling it! Here, put this ice there and see if that helps. If it swells up Mary Rose makes this Aloe Vera Nutrifying Lotion, Kenny Junior sunburned himself caddying after school last week and I gave him some and he said it really helped.

So they come in and sit down, I started to give them the booth in the back corner cause I thought, well they're famous, maybe they'd like some privacy, but The Colonel said No ma'am, we're on vacation, and then *he* said, Put us right here in the front window, it'll be good for business!

Which was just like him, because he meant it to be nice. He always was a nice man and good to his mother, I tell Kenny Junior he should pay attention to that. So anyway I sat them there and since I was in charge I had Loretta serve them. We were all feeling sorry for her, she just had that dinky little Half-Moon trailer to live in and some people in town thought she was just Bad Luck back in those days, she hadn't had a real date since Eddie left. Though she was really nice looking, she

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hadn't started drinking yet, not much at least, we used to have rum and cokes sometimes after work but nobody thought anything of it back then.

The Colonel ordered a Ribeye steak sandwich and he got fried chicken. Loretta says she doesn't remember, she was so nervous, but *I* remember. I told the director for the TV movie exactly what they had and even showed her how to set the platter. Just pay me my consulting fee, I told her.

I was only joking, Alice Jean. They're not really going to pay me for it.

Here's that Nutrifying Lotion. It doesn't smell as nice as the other but it sure feels good, doesn't it?

You're welcome, honey. I'm sure sorry about burning you like that.

Well he said it was the best fried chicken he ever had, and as you know if you read that book his wife wrote about him after he was dead, that man loved fried chicken better than Saint John loved the Lord, even after he got to be so famous he had to have it sent up to him in disguise from Popeye's. And really Loretta did a real nice job, she brought The Colonel extra ketchup without him asking and extra napkins for the fried chicken, because it *was* a little greasy, but good, and she was so cute in that pink uniform and all, that when they left he gave her his car. Just like that.

Brand new Cadillac. They just walked downtown to Don Thomas's dealership and bought another one. Drove by and waved to us on their way out of town.

Well, Loretta just about fainted. He kissed her cheek and The Colonel shook her hand and took a picture. Later Hal Morehead from the Reporter Dispatch came and took another picture of her and the car, and WINY made the next day Loretta Dooley Day and played Hound Dog and Love Me Tender about sixty three million times, I thought I was going to throw up if I heard that song one more time but it did get the point across. And of course Loretta had to learn to drive, but by then people were starting to show more interest and think maybe she wasn't bad luck after all, the absolute reverse in fact. Don Thomas came over, to see what model Cadillac it was this waitress got tipped with, and after awhile he and Loretta started seeing each other. And I got promoted to Manager Full Time. It was all good for business at the Blue Moon, I can tell you that.

But eventually it all settled down. She was still working at the Blue Moon, cause of course it was just a *car*, it wasn't like he gave her a million dollars or something. But she'd drive to work every day and park it out front, and people'd stop by just to see it, and then of course they'd come in to see *her*, and most of the time they'd have something to eat. I always recommended the fried chicken.

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After awhile Loretta stopped seeing Don Thomas. She found out he wasn't actually divorced from his wife after all, just separated, and his wife told him she was pregnant and Loretta put two and two together and told him he better find somewhere else to eat fried chicken, if he knew what was good for him. It was around then she got this weird idea for finding her daughter again.

Erika, I really do like the way he did your hair this time. Those red streaks really show off your eyes. With that color eye shadow you look like that actress in *Working Girl.* Doesn't she, Alice Jean? You know, what's-her-name's daughter. Kim Novak. The one married to what's-his-name.

Whoever.

So look at this, Loretta tells me one day at work. She'd been off for two days and drove in but I was in the back checking on the freezer cause the freon tube seized up, so I didn't see her drive up. Come on out, I want to show you something.

Well okay, I said. Just a minute; and then I went outside.

And you know, she had just ruined that car.

It was sky-blue and black, that car, I swear it was the prettiest thing on earth. The TV movie director, she wanted to make it pink but I told her, Come on, you think a man like that would drive a *pink* car? Back then you wouldn't be caught dead in a pink car, less you were a fairy.

Pardon me, can't say that anymore. I mean a gay. But *you* know what I mean, right Alice Jean? Back then regular people did *not* drive pink cars around. This one was sky blue.

Look at this, Erika—Mojave Turquoise! Since you're a Spring Rose you can wear that. Try this tester here. Alice Jean, that blusher takes ten years off your life, I am serious.

Did I tell you what she did?

All right. What she did was this: she spent that whole weekend off putting stuff on her car. I mean, *stuff*—old headlights painted green and blue and orange, rocking horses she took off their rockers and painted like carousel animals, Barbie dolls, you name it. All these old antennas she got at the dump and covered in foil and colored paper and stuck all over the car like—well, like these antennas stuck all over the car. There was even this Virgin Mary thing she put where a hood ornament would go, I think that was because of Eddie being a Catholic and having the marriage cancelled. I mean, it looked *awful.* And I said, Loretta honey, what in god's name have you done to your car?

She got kind of defensive. What do you mean? she said.

What do I *mean*? I said, I *mean* why have you made the car that beautiful man gave you look like it belongs in Ripley's Believe It or Not?

It's *my* car, she said. She was mad but she also looked like she might

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cry. And I already was one girl short because Jocelyn Reny's son Peter, the older one who's at Fort Bragg now, had unexpectedly fallen off the roof of their house and broken his arm and she had to take him to the hospital. So I couldn't afford for Loretta to go home because she was crying because I insulted her car, which looked like a blind person had decorated it.

So I said, Well, it's very interesting Loretta, that's all. It's very unusual.

She smiled then and walked over to it. She'd put a bicycle wheel over the front grill, and stuck these little troll dolls all around the edge of the wheel so it looked like a wheel with all these troll things sticking on it. I mean, how she drove that car to work without getting arrested I don't know.

Thank you, she said. She started braiding one of the Trolls' hair. She was always good at things like that. Probably she should of gone to the Academy of Beauty and studied Cosmetology. That's another reason it was so sad about her little girl.

Really, I said. It's very interesting.

I had to think about the customers.

Thank you, she said again, and she adjusted another part of the front, where she had stuck these Rat Fink key chains and a flamingo like we have in our front yard. Thank you, Terry. I put a lot of work into it.

I didn't know what else to say, but I had to say something so we could end this conversation and get back to work. So I said, Well, they're sure gonna see you coming, Loretta, that's for sure.

I know, she said. That's what I want. That's the whole point. And she patted it like it was something she had just won on "Let's Make a Deal," instead of a car you wouldn't want to see clowns climbing out of at the Fork Union Fair.

She said, people'll see me coming and they'll talk about me, and everyone'll know who is in this car. Even if they've never been to this town, even if they're a complete and total stranger, they'll hear about me and know how to find me.

Then without another word she turned around and went inside, like nothing unusual had happened at all.

Well, I'll tell you, everyone in the Tri-state area pretty well *did* know who owned that car already, because even though it had been a couple years now since she got it Loretta was sort of the town drunk and people knew her cause of that. And let's face it, a sky-blue Cadillac that the most famous man in the world gave you as a tip, who could forget about *that*? I mean, some people had forgotten, but then they recognized her for the other reason, so one way or the other Loretta Dooley was not

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exactly sneaking around Black Spot, Virginia without somebody knowing about it. So I didn't get why she wanted people to see it was her driving this car that looked like a King Kone on wheels, unless she wanted to give them the chance to see her coming from about three miles away and stay home if they wanted to.

Later I understood better, how she had this kind of daydream that someday her daughter would figure out who her real mother was and start looking for her. And I guess in Loretta's mind somehow her daughter would hear about the story of what happened and come to Black Spot to find her. And then of course once she was here she'd hear about the lady with this famous car, which on top of everything else now it looks like Woolworth's blew up on it. And so that way she'd be able to find her mama. It was kind of a sad thing, to think Loretta had this crazy old idea and thought junking up her nice car would help things along. But I didn't have time to discuss Loretta's problems right then.

Although to tell you the truth, it did seem to cheer her up some. She was lonely a lot, and sort of quiet. Some people thought she was stuck up, because of the Cadillac, but it wasn't that. It was that Nora Margaret Rule took her baby girl and gave her to perfect strangers when she was only three days old. Up until then Loretta was fine as frog hair. And afterward, well, she wasn't mean or anything. I mean, she was always nice to the customers and me and everybody, it's not like she was *ever* mean. But you could just sort of tell that maybe she felt like the only good thing that was ever going to happen to her already had, and let's face it, living in a rented Half-Moon trailer down on Delbarton and slinging hash at the Blue Moon is not what anyone wants to spend the rest of their life doing, even if you do own a famous Cadillac.

Which, incidentally, by this time was worth about zero money. All that junk she stuck on it weighed it down, and of course kids started trying to pull off the Rat Fink key chains and the baby dolls, and the antennas got snagged on branches and broke off. And to tell you the absolute truth, Loretta's driving wasn't all that great to begin with, so you can just imagine how that poor car looked after a few years.

He would roll over in his grave if he could see what you've done to this nice car, I told her once.

I'd be surprised there was room in his grave for him to turn in, Loretta said. She never forgave him for getting fat and running around on his wife and those other nasty things. Truth was, I think she never forgave him for not coming back and getting her and taking her the hell out of Black Spot.

Besides, why should he care, she sniffled. He never really gave a shit about me. It was just a publicity stunt, like Don said.

She really started crying then. He did tell her that once, Don Thomas

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did. I thought it was a real mean thing for him to say to her. Loretta is a *very* sensitive person.

Oh honey, that's not true, I told her. I was trying to fix that damn freezer again and she'd stayed late, to keep me company and also cause her license had been suspended and she didn't want Sergeant Merdeck to see her driving. She thought in the dark he wouldn't be able to tell it was her but there wasn't any way you could sneak that thing around, no way. Plus she'd had a few. I didn't say anything, but I could tell.

What?

Well, Alice Jean, all I can say is, if anyone ever had a good reason to drink, it was Loretta Dooley. I know some people do it just for fun. I cut back except for cookouts and parties sometimes. It just *ruins* your skin.

Why, thank you, Erika. I got it last quarter, for being Mary Rose's Most Improved Salesperson in the Southern Mid-Atlantic Area. Ken Senior gave me the gold chain for our anniversary, so it's sort of double special. The Mary Rose Cadillac is the same color, only kind of darker, sort of more purple. It's got whitewalls, too. I could have the first one in the Southern Mid-Atlantic, if I get it.

Doesn't that Aloe Vera feel nice, Alice Jean? I keep it in the fridge —makes it sort of a treat to get burned!

Anyway, as I was saying, Loretta was pretty upset that night. I guess it had just all sort of gotten her depressed. It was right after they shut down the Merriam Brick Plant in Petrol, and at the Blue Moon everybody's hours were cut back, not that we were making any money to begin with. That was when I first started thinking about working for myself. Plus her landlord had given her notice, they were developing that part of Delbarton and he just figured he'd cash in, I guess. But I was only trying to be nice to her, cheer her up.

It's not true, Loretta, I told her. I think he really meant it to be a nice thing. I think he truly appreciated the service you gave him.

Well, you are wrong, Terry Westerburgh, she said. You are wrong, cause he just did not give a shit, about me or anyone else. Her eyes got this kind of look sometimes when she was drinking, like if you were made of paper they would just burn you up. She crumpled her dixie cup and threw it on the floor and said, There are two kinds of people in this world, the Haves and the Have-Nots. And I am a Have-Not, and you know what *he* was.

Well, I got sort of P. O'd. then. I mean, here I was on my hands and knees, trying to fix that damn refrigerator, and it wasn't like Ken didn't have to work nights at Big Jim's Barbeque just so we'd get by, and here she was throwing dixie cups on the floor like she was the Queen of Sheba.

Now you listen to me, *Miss* Dooley, I said. I was pretty aggravated. He worked for everything he ever got, that man did, he was poor as dirt

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when he started and until the day he died he never forgot where he came from. *That's* why he gave you that car. But you just go ahead and listen to Don Thomas if you want and see where it gets you.

I see where it got me, she said, too mad herself by now to even care who it was she was talking to, Number One, her oldest friend Terry Westerburgh, Number Two, her boss. It got me a shitty job I can't even work enough hours to make my rent, if I had a place to rent, which I don't.

Well then you just see if you can find another place where you'll be happier, Miss Potty-mouth, I said, and I slammed the refrigerator shut and stomped out.

I was so mad. I shouldn't have to put up with that kind of talk. That was when I decided I was going to really have my own business someday, not work for some person who owns a diner. Sort of the first step toward working for Mary Rose Cosmetics, only of course I didn't know that then.

Erika honey, I know you would love it. You can set your own hours, sleep as late as you want, plus you get all your makeup free! And You-Know-Who would like *that*!

But you know I felt terrible about five minutes after yelling at her. I went into the back room, but she was gone. I heard her leaving, that poor old car scraping along the ground like some dog that got run over. It's funny but I even had started to like that car in a way. I mean it really *did* get your attention. The kids loved it. We got so we'd save old toys, dolls, and things, and parts from Ken's Buick and the lawnmower, and I'd bring them over and give them to Loretta and they'd all end up on her car. She had this giant Mister Potato Head she put on the roof and these colored tennis balls she stuck on all the antennas and really, it was a hoot. Plus her nephew had rigged up some kind of lights that blinked all around the rearview window and Jocelyn's son Peter gave her this funny moose horn she could honk. It was really from the football team but none of us was supposed to know that.

I went outside but it was too late. I really felt terrible. Like Ann Landers says, you should always make your words sweet, cause you never know when you'll have to eat them. If I had to eat my words right then I would have thrown up. And so right then I decided to quit the Blue Moon. If it was making me into this mean unkind person, well then it wasn't the job for me.

Alice Jean, you should kind of dab that Aloe Vera stuff off now, I think, honey, otherwise your pores turn a funny color. Here, use this—these are specially formulated for removing deep-down dirt and grime. Doesn't it smell refreshing!

Okay, this is the good part now. So Loretta is gone, and I felt real bad. I felt guilty, too, because I knew she'd had a few and all I could think of

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was her and her famous car going off the bridge into the reservoir. I thought of calling Bud Merdeck but then I thought, well Loretta's not going to feel any better spending the night in the drunk tank, so I decided I'd go after her. She was supposed to get all moved out the next day, she was supposed to have started packing stuff that night. Her sister was going to let her stay with her until she found another place. And you know, she really was in a tight spot, because where are you going to find a decent place to live on what you make working fifteen hours a week at the Blue Moon?

So I got in my car and drove to her house. It was dark by then, and a bad night. It had been raining off and on and now it had finally stopped but it was so foggy, I drove with my lowbeams on the whole way. Once I even slowed down and opened the window and stuck my head out, cause I couldn't see otherwise.

You know where she used to live. Where those Hunters Glen condos are now. That used to be all fields, just these three mobile homes that Gus Brinzer used to rent out. Loretta had the nicest one but that's not saying much. After they sold them they found out the Hells Angels used one of the others to make LSD in.

Well, I finally got there, but there was nobody home. I would've let myself in but when I peeked in the windows I saw all these boxes, and stuff thrown around everywhere, and—well, to tell you the truth, it was a terrible mess. I mean, it looked like the Hells Angels had been living *there*. And I knew then, things were worse with Loretta than I'd known. I mean, here she was, my oldest friend plus I was her supervisor, but I just had no idea. If I'd known I would've done something, she had a lot of friends, really, but I just had no idea at all.

So I waited outside. There was a kind of metal stairs in front of the trailer but that was broken so I sat on my car. I was there for a long time. It was cold, the fog was real damp and just sank into you after a while. I was starting to worry, too; I mean I was starting to get so worried I was afraid I'd start to scream, thinking of all the horrible things that might've happened to Loretta and I was nasty to her. I was just getting ready to let myself in and call Ken, when I heard somebody walking down the road.

I turned around and it was her. She looked awful, like when you see movies and there's people been in a car wreck. There was no blood or anything but she was wet and her hair was wet and she had mud on her face and oh, I just screamed and ran over and started hugging her.

Loretta, thank god you're all right! What happened?

She made a noise like she was embarrassed and then she started to cry.

I wrecked it, she said. I put my arms around her, I didn't even care I

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had already changed out of my uniform. She said, I went down Lee Highway and rolled it into the reservoir.

Oh my god! I said. You could have killed yourself, Loretta!

I know, she said. I had to swim out. It's in there so deep they'll never get it out. She really started crying then.

Why'd you do *that?* I said and started crying too, but I stopped. I only had one clean tissue left, and I gave it to her.

Because it doesn't matter, she said. My whole life and nothing matters. I live *here*—she bent and picked up a rock and threw it and broke a window, I heard it—in this *dump*, and now I don't even live here anymore. I had a husband and a baby for three days, and twenty-seven years ago someone famous gave me a goddam Cadillac as a tip, and that's it. That's my whole life. That's it, Terry. My whole life is right there.

Well you know I wished I could of said something to her, but she was right. That was her whole life, right there.

I just wish I could've kept my baby, she said. She was crying so I could hardly hear what she said. If they'd of left me my baby girl I would've felt like I had something. Like you have Ken and Little Kenny. I would have had Eloise.

I started crying again then too. I mean, god! It was just so *sad*. So then we sat for a little while but we didn't say anything. It was all just too depressing.

But after awhile I started to think, Well we have got to do something, we can't sit here all night in the mud, and I thought maybe I'd call Ken and see was it okay if Loretta came back with me and could stay at our house. I was just thinking of standing up and asking Loretta was it okay if I went inside to use the phone, when we heard it. It had started raining again, a little, and we had sat on that broken step in front of the trailer, cause there's an awning there.

Loretta stood up first. Oh my god, she said. Shit.

I listened and stood too. Shit, I said.

It was her car. That was obvious, I mean you couldn't mistake that car for anything else in the world. It sounded like it was having trouble getting over the last hill, where it was always overgrown and muddy anyway. And you figure a car that was in the bottom of the reservoir, it probably wouldn't run too well.

Shit, Loretta said again. That's it.

I knew just what she meant. I was thinking that Bud Merdeck had found it somehow and gotten Lynnwood Gentry to tow it out, and now how was Loretta going to pay for it, not to mention they could have arrested her, probably, for rolling a car into the reservoir on purpose. Especially that car.

And then it made this grinding nose, and suddenly it popped over the

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rise. The headlights were on, at least one of them was. The wheel that used to have the trolls on it and now had this Big Bird sort of tied to it was all bent up and the antennas were all mashed together. Whoever was driving it tried to honk the moose horn but it hardly made a noise at all. It was just about the saddest car you ever saw.

Loretta and I looked at each other and she rubbed at her face, trying to get some of the mud off.

We better go see who it is, I whispered. If it's Lynnwood I'll call Ken and he'll talk to him.

Thank you, Terry, she said. She knew that was my way of making up with her.

We started walking to the car, slowly because of the rain and it was sloppy going. The car had stopped at the edge of the drive and waited with the motor running. It didn't sound too good either. Maybe better than you'd expect, but it was pretty sad, to think that car had come to this. As we walked up to it the door on the passenger side popped open.

Hello? It was this woman's voice, nobody we knew.

Hi, I said. I stopped, wondering if maybe Lynnwood brought along his girlfriend Donna. He stays at the shop all night sometimes and on weekends she usually keeps him company.

But it wasn't Donna. It wasn't anybody that I recognized at all. This short woman, with dyed blonde hair. She stepped out of the car, jumping over the water. She had on nice clothes, not expensive or designer clothes but like a secretary's clothes, like she hadn't changed from work yet. She had a nice smile, and nice eyes—I know you wouldn't think you'd notice something like that in the dark but I did, I have a good eye for things like that. Mary Rose says that a great saleswoman needs an eye for detail.

Are you—? The woman started to say something, then she turned around and leaned back into the car, like she was asking the driver something. Then she turned around again and said, Is one of you Loretta Dooley?

That's me, said Loretta. She had this squinched-up tone. I knew she was nervous they were going to ask, Have you been drinking?

Instead the girl says, My name is Noreen Marcus.

Marcus? Loretta says.

That's right, says the girl. She glances back at the car, sort of nervously, but then it was like whoever was inside told her it was okay, so she goes on.

Noreen Marcus. My parents are Lowell and Angeline Marcus, in Richmond. I hitchhiked here. This man gave me a ride out by the reservoir. I'm your daughter.

My daughter? Loretta says, and *I'm* saying, Your *who*?

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Ye-es—

And the girl stepped forward, holding up her skirt so it wouldn't get wet, and then she looked up, and it was like for the first time she got a good look at Loretta in the headlight. Cause she suddenly gave this scream and started laughing, and dropped her purse in the water and ran across and I started running too, next to Loretta, only then at the last minute I stopped because I thought, Now wait a minute, this is something very special going on here between Loretta and this young woman who is her daughter, and so I stayed and waited a little while until they calmed down.

Well, Alice Jean, I knew it was her because she had Eddie Rule's eyes and his smile. He may have been a poor father but he did have a nice smile.

And so for a little while there was some crying and laughing and you can just imagine how we all felt. And all the while that old car just sat there, and whoever was inside turned the motor off after a while and just sat there too. There was no radio in it but you could hear him sort of humming to himself.

And finally Loretta said, Well for god's sakes let's go inside, we're getting soaked.

Well, wait a minute while I get my bag, said Noreen.

She went back to the car and stuck her head in and said something to whoever was in there.

Okay, now this is when I get goosebumps.

Because I couldn't hear what he was saying—it was too far away, and it wasn't like I wanted to eavesdrop or anything. I guess I sort of expected it must be old Eddie Rule inside. But now I could definitely hear his voice, and it wasn't Eddie Rule's voice at all. It was—

Well, *you* know whose voice it was.

Loretta knew, too. She stood by me with her arms crossed, shivering, and when she heard him she turned to me and opened her mouth and for a minute I thought she was going to faint.

Oh my god, she said, oh my *god*—

Thank you for the ride, I heard Noreen yelling at him, and I could just barely make out his voice saying something back to her, goodbye I guess, something like that. Then she pulled this suitcase out of the car and stood back while it backed up.

Loretta! I said, elbowing her and then pulling her to me. Loretta, hurry up! Tell him thank you—

And she yelled Thank you, thank you! and then she started running after the car, yelling and waving like she was crazy. Which we all were by then, all of us yelling and waving like we were crazy. Which we all were by then, all of us yelling and waving at him and laughing like we'd

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known each other all this time, when it'd really only been like, five minutes. And the car just kept backing up 'til it got over the top of the hill, and then I guess he turned it around and drove off. And that was the last time anybody ever saw Loretta's famous Cadillac.

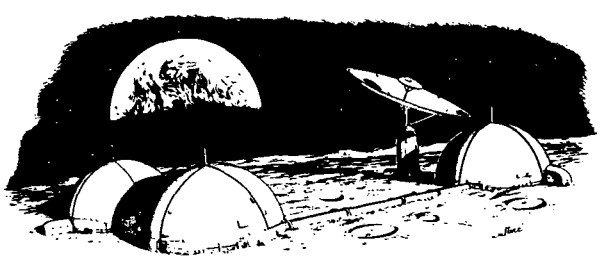
Afterward we went inside and kind of dried off and then on the way to my house we stopped at Big Jim's and got a half-dozen Specials and went home. The Specials were so Ken Senior wouldn't be too mad about me being out so late.

And so that's how it happened. Next day of course the story got out, because there is no way, just no way, you can keep something like that a secret. Noreen says she thinks it was just a coincidence, she says everybody out here in Black Spot looks like Him and who could tell the difference? Plus she said if it was really him wouldn't he have been in a fancy limousine, not some crazy fixed-up car her real mother drove into the reservoir.

But *I* said, Well that's how you know it was really Him. Cause it's like Loretta said, there's the Haves and there's the Have-Nots, and if you're a Have-Not you never forget what it's like to be poor and on your own. I mean how could he have sung Heartbreak Hotel otherwise? Noreen said Well I still have my doubts, but when she and her mama went on Oprah they played it up for all they could, I can tell you that. And like the TV movie director says, it doesn't really matter, does it? Because it's such a good story.

And I mean there's Noreen reunited with Loretta to prove it, not to mention how would you ever get a car like that out of the reservoir, *plus* where is that car now, I ask you? Because I saw it too, and I hadn't had a thing to drink.

What do I think? Well, Erika honey, I guess it's just one of those things. Strange things happen sometimes and you just got to take the good with the bad, is all. But you won't hear me complaining about how it all turned out, not as long as business stays this good and I get that new Mary Rose Cadillac in the fall, no ma'am. ●



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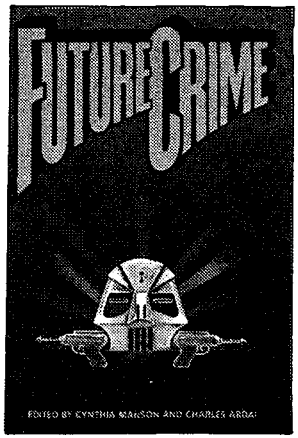

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SECOND LIVES

by M. Shayne Bell

In 1991, the author was awarded a Creative Writing Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and though warned about the dangers of his subsequent course of action, he quit his day job to pursue a full-time writing career. He's now completing a book-length series of stories set in Niger which will include "Dry Niger" (*IAsfm*, August 1990). His next project will be a novel set in the same political universe as his first book, *Nicoji*.

I gave my mother and father their second lives two days before doing it became impossible, two days before Arath's armies took the city. My parents thanked me with a public dinner in a temple garth, at which they served real meat. I never saw my parents again. When I had children, they were supposed to do the same for me.

The next morning I felt sick, but the temple sewers quit working and all the other initiates and I were assigned to help carry buckets of old blood up the stairs to the surface, where we dumped them on the east lawns. Thousands crowding around the temple in the crush ahead of Arath's advance could watch us. Few would. Some of those who did left.

We worked through the day, let off only for meals. In the night, Arath's troops took the ridges west of us, but they stopped the shelling. The night was quiet. None of us were allowed to sleep. Our shoulders and arms ached. My legs were caked with blood.

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On one trip up, before dawn, Lieutenant Hazael, of the temple guard, stood waiting for us. He made us stop, and Niram spilled his buckets on the steps. The lieutenant didn't care. He jerked up the sleeves of our tunics to read the numbers tattooed on our arms, and when he read mine, he stiffened, ordered me to follow him, and started down the steps.

I followed. He shoved me ahead of him into the temple guard headquarters and pushed me into a side room. Two priests and the Head Vivifier—an old man, very pale and stooped that night; I had seen him twice before—sat waiting there. The Vivifier slammed shut a book he was reading, squinted at me, and looked at Hazael. "You trust *this boy?*"

"He has carried out every order given him—faithfully," Hazael said with a touch of sarcasm I thought very insolent.

"Send him." The Vivifier stood up and walked out, clutching the book to his chest, helped by one of the priests. The other priest shoved something into Hazael's hands as he left. Hazael gave it to me. It was a photograph of an old man with a long, gray beard and a red scar that ran straight across his forehead.

"Could you recognize that man if you saw him?" Hazael demanded.

"Yes, sir."

"Then find him. Bring him to me. He is in the temple already, and he must not enter the Vivifier's chambers. Get to him before he reaches the third level."

"But—"

"Find him! There are reasons for sending you. I need my men in other places."

I moved to the door, but he pulled me back. "Take this. Show it to the priests as you go down."

He handed me a rectangular metal chip with patterns of green dots blinking on it. I put it in my tunic pocket and started out. He stopped me again.

"You might need this," he said curtly, handing me a gun on a belt. "Tie it inside your tunic where it can't be seen but where you can get to it easily."

"I've never fired one."

"Take it! *He* won't know that."

I strapped the gun inside my tunic and left. Hazael stood in the doorway and watched me go. I stopped at the fountain and tried to wash off some of the blood, but it was no use, so I forced my way through the crowd on the temple steps just as I was.

"You can't come through here," a temple guard at the top said, and he shoved me back down a few steps. I took out the chip and handed it to him. He looked surprised, held it up to watch the lights blink, and finally gave it back and let me in.

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I knew the way the old man would have to take—I had gone that way with my parents. People lined both sides of the great hall that led to the stairway down. Most were old, and most family groups had at least one young man or woman—a son or a niece—with them (it cost more without a young relative, and there were more risks). They all stared at me in silence. I stared back at the old men. None of them had the scar of the man in the photograph.

The priests and vestals on the second level clustered around me after I showed one of them the chip. One vestal wept when she saw it. No one would tell me what it meant to them. I thought it was just getting me through the temple without the company of adults—a pass. A few priests remembered seeing the man in the photograph. They all thought he was just ahead in the line somewhere, but no one would take me to him.

Finally, an attendant in the dressing rooms told me the old man had already gone into one of the chapels. I did not know what to do. I could not interrupt the meetings. Still, I hurried to the chapel hallway. The first four chapels were empty—the people in them had gone down to the third level. So I waited by the door of the fifth chapel. Through it I could hear a high vestal chant the Litany for New Life, a litany that spoke of the responsibilities sixty or seventy additional years of life would bring. When she finished, all the people in the chapel sang a hymn, and the door opened. I watched the people file through it. He was not with them. I watched by the sixth chapel, but he did not come out of there either, and so on through six more chapels. He had evidently been in one of the first four.

The priest in that last chapel looked scared when I showed him the chip and the photograph. He rushed me to the stairs leading to the third level. I asked him if he would go down with me and help me find the man, but he said he could spare me no more time and hurried away.

The waiting rooms on the third level were crowded. The old man was not in any of them. So I walked to the Doors of Life. Emeralds set in them gleamed in a green burst out of the darkness of the hall. A special guard of priests stood there. They had just let the man in my photograph through the doors. As they opened them for me, one of the guards bolted down the hall for the stairs; the others cursed him. But after they clanged the doors shut behind me, I could hear more steps running away to the stairs.

I stood in the doorway, looking down at the rugs. I realized that my hand was inside my tunic, clutching the gun, but my hand was shaking, and I knew that just then I could not pull out the gun and hold it. Still, I could not run away. Hazael had told the Head Vivifier that I did everything they asked—faithfully. So I forced myself to look up. Three people sat in the room: an old woman holding a little, black-haired girl;

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and the man I sought. A door across from me opened. A vivifier in his scarlet robes stepped in from his chambers, called the name of the woman, and led her and the little girl out. I was alone with the man.

"Sir," I said.

He would not look up.

"Sir, you must come back out with me."

He still would not look up. "I'm too close," he said hoarsely. "They would never let me go anywhere else now."

I did not understand. "But they would, sir. They sent me for you."

The old man ran a finger along the scar on his forehead. "You're just a *boy!*"

I managed to draw the gun, and I activated it. The sound made him start. He clutched the arms of the chair he sat in, still looking determinedly at the floor.

"Don't let me see the gun! Put it back—hide it! Don't you know what will happen if I see it?"

His knuckles where he gripped the chair were white; his face was very white.

"Why can't you look at me?" I asked.

"Because they can *see* everything I see. Put the gun away."

I put it back.

"You're lucky they didn't have time to work with my ears," he said.

"Who?"

"Arath's doctors, of course. Why do you think you were sent to get me?"

"Arath's doctors can see what you see?"

"No! His generals—Arath himself, for all I know. His doctors put the transmitters in my eyes."

"In your eyes!"

Again he fingered the scar on his forehead. "You don't know what else they put in me, do you?"

I said nothing. I did not know. He kept rubbing the scar. "Leave this place, boy," he whispered. "You might yet get to the surface."

Then I knew, but I could not move. "Why did you let them put a bomb in you?" I stammered.

"They would have killed my family. They probably killed them anyway."

I hugged the gun tight against my stomach so it could not fall on the floor for the man to see.

"You're thinking that Arath's people are horrible, aren't you?" he asked.

I said nothing.

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"Is what they did to me worse than what your people did to *you*—sending you, a boy, after me to make the bomb detonate before it could damage the heart of their temple?"

I could move.

I pushed open the door and ran down the hall. People stood crammed around the stairs, trying to get out. The chip had explained what was happening to the temple workers behind me, and they had told the people. I shouted for the people to follow me up the stairs we used to carry out the blood. Some did.

I was nearly to the surface when the first explosion came. The bomb in the old man was more powerful than Hazael, the Head Vivifier, or anyone had imagined. The roar hurt my ears; when I got outside, my clothes were on fire. I fell on the grass and rolled in the blood we had dumped. I heard more explosions. The ground around me began to sag. I scrambled up and ran down to the trees by the river.

As soon as the temple exploded, Arath's troops began shelling the city again. I could hear bombs exploding on the temple hill. I tried to run along the river, but the brush hurt my burns too much. I stopped on the bank, set down the gun, pulled off my tunic, and waded out in the water to cool my burns and try to rinse the blood out of the tunic. Only then did I realize I was crying, and I made myself stop.

Except for the shelling, I could hear no other sound. Soon I could not hear even that. I could not hear the water swirl around me or the birds cry out in the dark trees before the dawn. I clapped my hands by my ears, but it was no use. I could not hear.

I saw an uprooted tree floating by a little farther out. I went back to the shore for the gun and waded out to the tree. It had been partly burned. Some explosion upstream had knocked it in the river. I climbed on it and wrung the water out of my tunic, wrapped the gun in it, and tied the tunic to a branch. The chip fell out of the pocket into my hand, the green lights still blinking. I threw it as far as I could. I pushed the tree toward the current and crawled partway up the half-submerged trunk and lay down hidden by branches and leaves. I did not look back. ●

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Ian R. MacLeod's fiction has taken us from the lushly naturalistic nineteenth-century setting of "Green" (Mid-December 1990) to the polluted and decaying planet of "The Giving Mouth" (March 1991). He now sets off in an entirely new direction, offering us a truly bizarre tale of what if means to be "Growrups."

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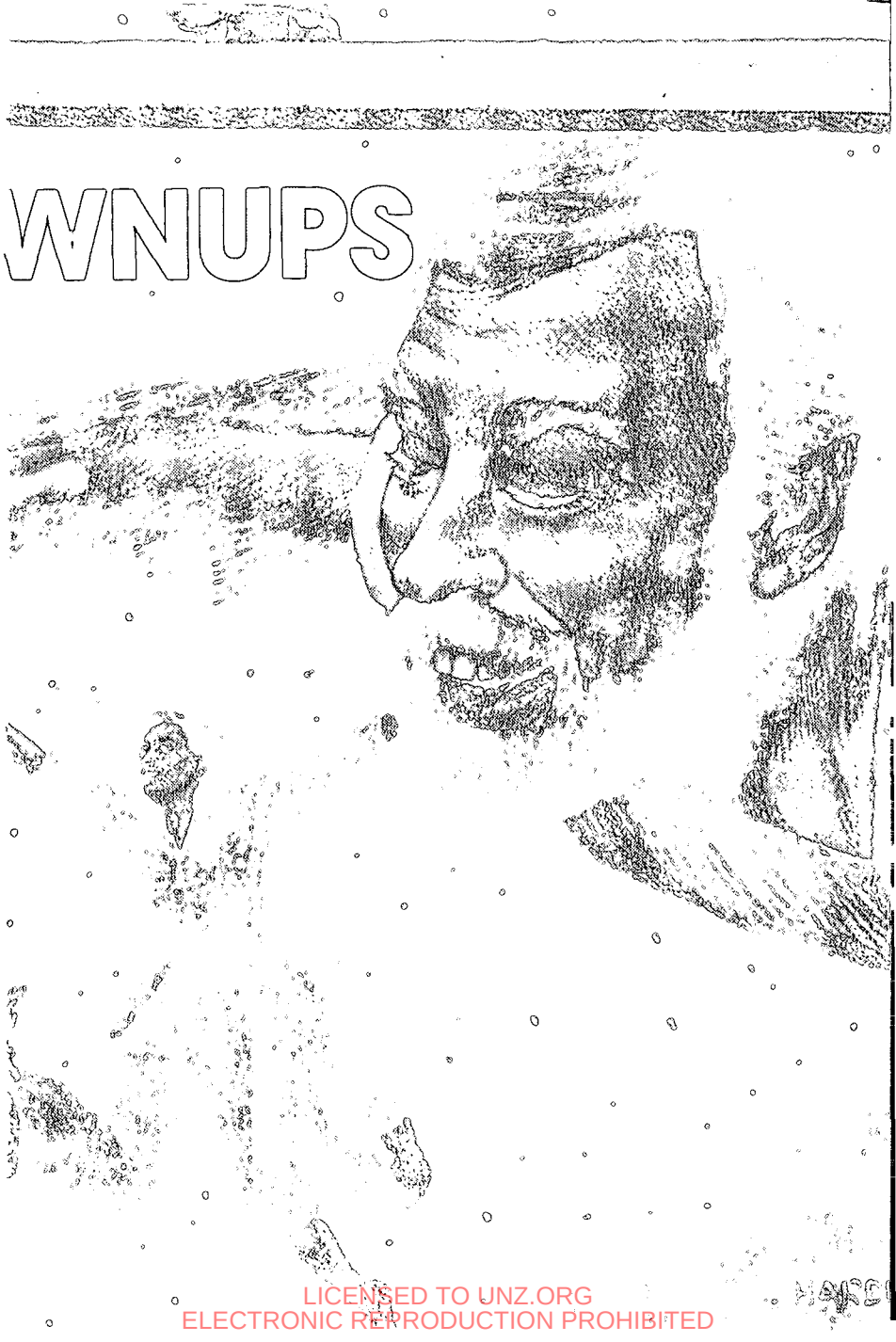

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Bobby finally got around to asking Mum where babies came from on the evening of his seventh birthday. It had been hot all day, and the grownups and a few of the older children who had come to his party were still outside on the lawn. He could hear their talk and evening birdsong through his open window as Mum closed the curtains. She leaned down to kiss his forehead. She'd been drinking since the first guests arrived before lunch and her breath smelt like windfall apples. Now seemed as good a time as any. As she turned towards the door, he asked his question. It came out as a whisper, but she heard, and frowned for a moment before she smiled.

"You children always want to know too soon," she said. "I was the same, believe me, Bobby. But you must be patient. You really must."

Bobby knew enough about grownups to realize that it was unwise to push too hard. So he forced himself to yawn and blink slowly so she would think he was truly sleepy. She patted his hand.

After his door had clicked shut, after her footsteps had padded down the stairs, Bobby slid out of bed. Ignoring the presents piled in the corner by the closet—robots with sparking eyes, doll soldiers, and submarines—he peered from the window. They lived at the edge of town, where rooftops dwindled to green hills and the silver curl of the river. He watched Mum emerge from the French windows onto the wide lawn below. She stopped to say something to Dad as he sat lazing in a deckchair with the other men, a beercan propped against his crotch. Then she took a taper from the urn beside the barbecue and touched it to the coals. She proceeded to light the lanterns hanging from the boughs of the cherry trees.

The whole garden filled with stars. After she had lit the last lantern, Mum put the taper to her mouth and extinguished it with her tongue. Then she rejoined the women gossiping on the white wrought iron chairs. The remaining children were all leaving for home. Cars were starting up, turning out from the shaded drive. Bobby heard his brother Tony call goodnight to the grownups and thunder up the stairs. He tensed in case Tony should decide to look in on him before he went to bed, but relaxed after the toilet had flushed and Tony's bedroom door had slammed. It was almost night. Bobby knew that his window would show as no more than a darker square against the wall of the house. He widened the parting in the curtain.

He loved to watch the grownups when they thought they were alone. It was a different world. One day, Mum had told him often enough, one day, sweet little Bobby, you'll understand it all, touching his skin as she spoke with papery fingers. But give it time, my darling one, give it time. Being a grownup is more wonderful than you children could ever imagine. More wonderful. Yes, my darling. Kissing him on the forehead and each eye and then his mouth, the way she did when she got especially tender.

Bobby gazed down at the grownups. They had that loose look that came when the wine and the beer had gone down well and there was more to

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come, when the night was warm and the stars mirrored the lanterns. Dad raised his can from his crotch to his lips. One of the men beside him made a joke and the beer spluttered down Dad's chin, gleaming for a moment before he wiped it away. The men always talked like this, loud between bursts of silence, whilst the women's voices—laughing serious sad —brushed soft against the night. Over by the trellis archway that led by the garbage cans to the front, half a dozen uncles sat in the specially wide deckchairs that Dad kept for them behind the mower in the shed.

Bobby couldn't help staring at the uncles. They were all grossly fat. There was Uncle Stan, Uncle Harold, and, of course, his own Uncle Lew. Bobby saw with a certain pride that Lew was the biggest. His tie was loose and his best shirt strained like a full sail across his belly. Like all the uncles, Lew lived alone, but Dad or the father of one of the other families Lew was uncle to was always ready to take the car down on a Saturday morning, paint the windows of his house, or see to the lawn. In many ways, Bobby thought, it was an ideal life. People respected uncles. Even more than their girth required, they stepped aside from them in the street. But at the same time, his parents were often edgy when Lew was around, uncharacteristically eager to please. Sometimes late in the night, Bobby had heard the unmistakable clatter of his van on the gravel out front, Mum and Dad's voices whispering softly excited in the hall. Gazing at Lew, seated with the other uncles, Bobby remembered how he had dragged him to the moist folds of his belly, rumbling Won't You Just Look At This Sweet Kid? His yeasty aroma came back like the aftertaste of bad cooking.

Someone turned the record player on in the lounge. Sibilant music drifted like smoke. Some of the grownups began to dance. Women in white dresses blossomed as they turned, and the men were darkly quick. The music and the sigh of their movement brushed against the humid night, coaxed the glow of the lanterns, silvered the rooftops and the stars.

The dancing quickened, seeking a faster rhythm inside the slow beat. Bobby's eyes fizzed with sleep. He thought he saw grownups floating heartbeat on heartbeat above the lawn. Soon they were leaping over the lanterned cherry trees, flying, pressing close to his window with smiles and waves, beckoning him to join them. Come out and play, Bobby, out here amid the stars. The men darted like eels, the women did high kicks across the rooftop, their dresses billowing coral frills over their heads. The uncles bobbed around the chimney like huge balloons.

When Bobby awoke, the lanterns were out. There was only darkness, summer chill.

As he crawled back to bed, a sudden sound made him freeze. Deep and feral, some kind of agony that was neither pain nor grief, it started loud then came down by notches to a stuttering sob. Bobby unfroze when it ended and hauled the blankets up to his chin. Through the bedroom wall,

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he could hear the faint mutter of Dad's voice, Mum's half-questioning reply. Then Uncle Lew saying goodnight. Slow footsteps down the stairs. The front door slam. Clatter of an engine coming to life.

Sigh of gravel.

Silence.

Bobby stood at the far bank of the river. His hands clenched and unclenched. Three years had passed. He was now ten; his bother Tony was sixteen.

Tony was out on the river, atop the oildrum raft that he and the other kids of his age had been building all summer. The wide sweep that cut between the fields and the gasometers into town had narrowed in the drought heat. Tony was angling a pole through the sucking silt to get to the deeper current. He was absorbed, alone; he hadn't noticed Bobby standing on the fissured mud of the bank. Earlier in the summer, there would have been a crowd of Tony's friends out there, shouting and diving, sitting with their heels clutched in brown hands, chasing Bobby away with shouts or grabbing him with terrible threats that usually ended in a simple ducking or just laughter, some in cutoff shorts, their backs freckled pink from peeling sunburn, some sleekly naked, those odd dark patches of hair showing under their arms and bellies. Maggie Brown, with a barking voice you could hear half a mile off, Pete Thorn, who kept pigeons and always seemed to watch, never said anything, maybe Johnnie Redhead and his sidekicks, even Trev Lee, if his hay fever, asthma, and psoriasis hadn't kept him inside, or maybe the twin McDonald sisters, whom no one could tell apart.

Now Tony was alone.

"Hey!" Bobby yelled, not wanting to break into his brother's isolation, but knowing he had to. "Hey, Tony!"

Tony poled once more toward the current. The drums shook, tensed against their bindings, then inched toward the main sweep of the river.

"Hey, Tony, Mum says you've got to come home right *now*."

"All right, *all right*."

Tony let go of the pole, jumped down into the water. It came just below his naked waist. He waded out clumsily, falling on hands and knees. He crouched to wash himself clean in a cool eddy where the water met the shore, then shook like a dog. He grabbed his shorts from the branch of a dead willow and hauled them on.

"Why didn't you just come?" Bobby asked. "You must have known it was time. The doc's waiting at home to give you your tests."

Tony slicked back his hair. They both stared at the ground. The river still dripped from Tony's chin, made tiny craters in the sand. Bobby noticed that Tony hadn't shaved, which was a bad sign in itself. Out on the river, the raft suddenly bobbed free, floating high on the quick current.

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Tony shook his head. "Never did that when *I* was on it. Seemed like a great idea, you know? Then you spend the whole summer trying to pole out of the mud."

Around them, the bank was littered with the spoor of summer habitation. The blackened ruin of a bonfire, stones laid out in the shape of a skull, junkfood wrappers, an old flap of canvas propped up like a tent, ringpull cans and cigarette butts, a solitary shoe. Bobby had his own friends—his own special places—and he came to this spot rarely and on sufferance. But still, he loved his brother, and was old enough to have some idea of how it must feel to leave childhood behind. But he told himself that most of it had gone already. Tony was the last; Pete and Maggie and the McDonald twins had grown up. Almost all the others too. That left just Trev Lee, who had locked himself in the bathroom and swallowed a bottle of bleach whilst his parents hammered at the door.

Tony made a movement that looked as though it might end in a hug. But he slapped Bobby's head instead, almost hard enough to hurt. They always acted tough with each other; it was too late now to start changing the rules.

They followed the path through the still heat of the woods to the main road. It was midday. The shimmering tarmac cut between yellow fields toward town. Occasionally, a car or truck would appear in the distance, floating silent on heat ghosts before the roar and the smell suddenly broke past them, whipping dust into their faces. Bobby gazed at stalking pylons, ragged fences, the litter-strewn edges of the countryside; it was the map of his own childhood. It was Tony's too—but Tony only stared at the verge. It was plain that he was tired of living on the cliff-edge of growing up.

Tony looked half a grownup already, graceful, clumsy, self-absorbed. He hadn't been his true self through all this later part of the summer, or at least not since Joan Trackett had grown up. Joan had a fierce crop of hair and protruding eyes; she had come to the area with her parents about six years before. Bobby knew that she and Tony had been having sex since at least last winter and maybe before. He'd actually stumbled across them one day in spring, lying on a dumped mattress in the east fields up beyond the garbage dump, hidden amid the bracken in a corner that the farmer hadn't bothered to plough. Tony had chased him away, alternately gripping the open waistband of his jeans and waving his fists. But that evening Tony had let Bobby play with his collection of model cars, which was a big concession, even though Bobby knew that Tony had mostly lost interest in them already. They had sat together in Tony's bedroom that smelled of peppermint and socks. I guess you know what Joan and I were doing, he had said. Bobby nodded, circling a black V8 limo with a missing tire around the whorls and dustballs of the carpet. It's no big deal, Tony said, picking at a scab on his chin. But his eyes had gone blank with puzzlement, as though he couldn't remember something important.

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Bobby looked up at Tony as they walked along the road. He was going to miss his big brother. He even wanted to say it, although he knew he wouldn't be able to find the words. Maybe he'd catch up with him again when he turned grownup himself, but that seemed a long way off. At least five summers.

The fields ended. The road led into Avenues, Drives, and Crofts that meandered a hundred different ways toward home.

The doctor's red station wagon was parked under the shade of the poplar in their drive.

"You *don't* make people wait," Mum said, her breath short with impatience, shooing them both quickly down the hallway into the kitchen. "I'm disappointed in you, Tony. You too, Bobby. You're both old enough to know better." She opened the fridge and took out a tumbler of bitter milk. "And Tony, you didn't drink this at breakfast."

"Mum, does it matter? I'll be a grownup soon anyway."

Mum placed it on the scrubbed table. "Just drink it."

Tony drank. He wiped his chin and banged down the glass.

"Well, off you go," Mum said.

He headed up the stairs.

Doctor Halstead was waiting for Tony up in the spare room. He'd been coming around to test him every Tuesday since Mum and Dad received the brown envelope from school, arriving punctually at twelve thirty, taking best-china coffee with Mum in the lounge afterward. There was no mystery about the tests. Once or twice, Bobby had seen the syringes and the blood analysis equipment spread out on the candlewick breadspread through the open door. Tony had told him what it was like, how the doc stuck a big needle in your arm to take some blood. It hurt some, but not much. He had shown Bobby the sunset bruises on his arm with that perverse pride that kids display over any wound.

Doctor Halstead came down half an hour later, looking stern and noncommittal. Tony followed in his wake. He shushed Bobby and tried to listen to Mum's conversation with the doc over coffee in the lounge by standing by the door in the hall. But grownups had a way of talking that made it difficult to follow, lowering their voices at the crucial moment, clinking their cups. Bobby imagined them stifling their laughter behind the closed door, deliberately uttering meaningless fragments they knew the kids would hear. He found the thought oddly reassuring.

Tony grew up on the Thursday of that same week. He and Bobby had spent the afternoon together down at Monument Park. They had climbed the whispering boughs of one of the big elm trees along the avenue and sat with their legs dangling, trying to spit on the heads of the grownups passing below.

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"Will you tell me what it's like?" Bobby had asked when his mouth finally went dry.

"What?" Tony looked vague. He picked up a spider that crawled onto his wrist and rolled it between finger and thumb.

"About being a grownup. Talk to me afterward. I want . . . I want to know."

"Yeah, yeah. We're still brothers, right?"

"You've got it. And—"

"—Hey, shush!"

Three young grownups were heading their way, a man, a woman, and an uncle. Bobby supposed they were courting—they had their arms around each other in that vaguely passionless way that grownups had, their faces absent, staring at the sky and the trees without seeing. He began to salivate.

"Bombs away."

Bobby missed with his lob, but Tony hawked up a green one and scored a gleaming hit on the crown of the woman's head. The grownups walked on, stupidly oblivious.

It was a fine afternoon. They climbed higher still, skinning their palms and knees on the greenish bark, feeling the tree sway beneath them like a dancer. From up here, the park shimmered, you could see everything; the lake, the glittering greenhouses, grownups lazing on the grass, two fat kids from Tony's year lobbing stones at a convoy of ducks. Bobby grinned and threw back his head. Here, you could feel the hot sky around you, taste the clouds like white candy.

"You *will* tell me what it's like to be a grownup?" he asked again.

But Tony suddenly looked pale and afraid, holding onto the trembling boughs. "Let's climb down," he said.

When Bobby thought back, he guessed that that was the beginning.

Mum took one look at Tony when they got home and called Doctor Halstead. He was quick in coming. On Mum's instructions, Bobby also phoned Dad at the office, feeling terribly grownup and responsible as he asked to be put through in the middle of a meeting.

Tony was sitting on the sofa in the lounge, rocking to and fro, starting to moan. Dad and the doc carried him to the spare bedroom. Mum followed them up the stairs, then pulled the door tightly shut. Bobby waited downstairs in the kitchen and watched the shadows creep across the scrubbed table. Occasionally, there were footsteps upstairs, the rumble of voices, the hiss of a tap.

He had to fix his own tea from leftovers in the fridge. Later, somehow all the house lights got turned on. Everything was hard and bright like a fierce lantern, shapes burned through to the filaments beneath. Bobby's head was swimming. He was someone else, thinking, this is my house, my

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brother, knowing at the same time that it couldn't be true. Upstairs, he could hear someone's voice screaming, saying My God No.

Mum came down after ten. She was wearing some kind of plastic apron that was wet where she'd wiped it clean.

"Bobby, you've got to go to bed." She reached to grab his arm and pull him from the sofa.

Bobby held back for a moment. "What's happening to Tony, Mum? Is he okay?"

"Of course he's *okay*. It's nothing to get excited about. It happens to us all, it . . ." Anger came into her face. "Will you just get upstairs to bed, Bobby? You shouldn't be up this late anyway. Not tonight, not any night."

Mum followed Bobby up the stairs. She waited to open the door of the spare room until he'd gone into the bathroom. Bobby found there was no hot water, no towels; he had to dry his hand on squares of toilet paper, and the flush was slow to clear, as though something was blocking it.

He sprinted across the dangerous space of the landing and into bed. He tried to sleep.

In the morning there was the smell of toast. Bobby came down the stairs slowly, testing each step.

"So, you're up," Mum said, lifting the kettle from the burner as it began to boil.

It was eight thirty by the clock over the fridge; a little late, but everything was as brisk and sleepy as any other morning. Dad stared at the sports pages, eating his cornflakes. Bobby sat down opposite him at the table, lifted the big cereal packet that promised a scale model if you collected enough coupons. That used to drive Tony wild, how the offer always changed before you had enough. Bobby shook some flakes into a bowl.

"How's Tony?" he asked, tipping out milk.

"Tony's fine," Dad said. Then he swallowed and looked up from the paper—a rare event in itself. "He's just resting, Son. Upstairs in his own room, his own bed."

"Yes, darling." Mum's voice came from behind. Bobby felt her hands on his shoulders, kneading softly. "It's such a happy day for your Dad and me. Tony's a grownup now. Isn't that wonderful?" The fingers tightened, released.

"That doesn't mean *you* don't go to school," Dad added. He gave his paper a shake, rearranged it across the teapot and the marmalade jar.

"But be sure to tell Miss Gibson what's happened." Mum's voice faded to the back of the kitchen. The fridge door smacked open. "She'll want to know why you're late for register." Bottles jingled. Mum wafted close

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again. She came around to the side of the table and placed a tumbler filled with white fluid beside him. The bitter milk. "We know you're still young," she said. "But there's no harm, and now seems as good a time as any." Her fingers turned a loose button on her blouse. "Try it, darling, it's not so bad."

What happens if I don't. . . . Bobby glanced quickly at Mum, at Dad. What happens if . . . through the kitchen window, the sky was summer grey, the clouds casting the soft warm light that he loved more than sunlight, that brought out the green in the trees and made everything seem closer and more real. What happens . . . Bobby picked up the tumbler in both hands, drank it down in breathless gulps, the way he'd seen Tony do so often in the past.

"Good lad," Mum sighed after he'd finished. She was behind him again, her fingers trailing his neck. Bobby took a breath, suppressed a shudder. This bitter milk tasted just as Tony always said it did: disgusting.

"Can I see Tony now, before I go to school?"

Mum hesitated. Dad looked up again from his newspaper. Bobby knew what it would be like later, the cards, the flowers, the house lost in strangers. This was his best chance to speak to his brother.

"Okay," Mum said. "But not for long."

Tony was sitting up in bed, the TV Mum and Dad usually kept in their own bedroom propped on the dressing table. Having the TV was a special sign of illness; Bobby had had it twice himself, once with chicken pox, and then with mumps. The feeling of luxury had almost made the discomfort worthwhile.

"I just thought I'd see how you were," Bobby said.

"What?" Tony lifted the remote control from the bedspread, pressed the red button to kill the sound. It was a reluctant gesture that Bobby recognized from Dad.

"How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine, Bobby."

"Did it hurt?"

"Yes . . . Not really." Tony shrugged. "What do you want me to say? You'll find out soon enough, Bobby."

"Don't you remember yesterday? You said you'd tell me everything."

"Of course I remember, but I'm just here in bed . . . watching the TV. You can see what it's like." He spread his arms. "Come here, Bobby."

Bobby stepped forward.

Tony grinned. "Come on, little brother."

Bobby leaned forward over the bed, let Tony clasp him in his arms. It was odd to feel his brother this way, the soft plates of muscle, the ridges of chest and arm. They'd held each other often enough before, but only in the wrestling bouts that Bobby launched into when he had nothing

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better to do, certain that he'd end up bruised and kicking, pinned down and forced to submit. But now the big hands were patting his back. Tony was talking over his shoulder.

"I'll sort through all the toys in the next day or so. You can keep all the best stuff to play with. Like we said yesterday, we're still brothers, right?" He leaned Bobby back, looked into his eyes. "Right?"

Bobby had had enough of grownup promises to know what they meant. Grownups were always going to get this and fix that, build wendy houses on the lawn, take you to the zoo, staple the broken strap on your satchel—favors that never happened, things they got angry about if you ever mentioned them again.

"All the best toys. Right?"

"Right," Bobby said. He turned for the door, then hesitated. "Will you tell me one thing?"

"What?"

"Where babies come from."

Tony hesitated, but not unduly; grownups always thought before they spoke. "They come from the bellies of uncles, Bobby. A big slit opens and they tumble out. It's no secret, it's a natural fact."

Bobby nodded, wondering why he'd been so afraid to ask. "I thought so . . . thanks."

"Any time," Tony said, and turned up the TV.

"Thanks again." Bobby closed the door behind him.

Tony finished school officially at the end of that term. But there were no awards, no speeches, no bunting over the school gates. Like the other new grownups, he just stopped attending, went in one evening when it was quiet to clear out his locker, as though the whole thing embarrassed him. Bobby told himself that was one thing he'd do differently when his time came. He'd spent most of his life at school, and he wasn't going to pass it by that easily. Grownups just seemed to let things *go*. It had been the same with Dad, when he moved from the factory to the admin offices in town, suddenly ignoring men he'd shared every lunchtime with and talked about for years as though they were friends.

Tony sold his bicycle through the classified pages to a kid from across town who would have perhaps a year's use of it before he too grew up. He found a temporary job at the local supermarket. He and Dad came home at about the same time each evening, the same bitter work smell coming off their bodies. Over dinner, Mum would ask them how everything had gone and the talk would lie flat between them, drowned by the weak distractions of the food.

For Tony, as for everyone, the early years of being a grownup were a busy time socially. He went out almost every night, dressed in his new

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grownup clothes and smelling of soap and aftershave. Mum said he looked swell. Bobby knew the places in town he went to by reputation. He had passed them regularly and caught the smell of cigarettes and booze, the drift of breathless air and sudden laughter. There were strict rules against children entering. If he was with Mum, she would snatch his hand and hurry him on. But she and Dad were happy for Tony to spend his nights in these places now that he was a grownup, indulging in the ritual dance that led to courtship, marriage, and a fresh uncle in the family. On the few occasions that Tony wasn't out late, Dad took him for driving lessons, performing endless three point turns on the tree-lined estate roads.

Bobby would sit with his homework spread on the dining room table as Mum saw to things that didn't need seeing to. There was a distracting stiffness about her actions that was difficult to watch, difficult not to. Bobby guessed that although Tony was still living at home and she was pleased that he'd taken to grownup life, she was also missing him, missing the kid he used to be. It didn't require a great leap of imagination for Bobby to see things that way; he missed Tony himself. The arguments, the fights, the sharing and the not-sharing, all lost with the unspoken secret of being children together, of finding everything frightening, funny, and new.

In the spring, Tony passed his driving test and got a proper job at the supermarket as trainee manager. There was a girl called Marion who worked at the checkout. She had skin trouble like permanent sunburn and never looked at you when she spoke. Bobby already knew that Tony was seeing her in the bars at night. He sometimes answered the phone by mistake when she rang, her slow voice saying Is Your Brother Around as Tony came down the stairs from his room looking annoyed. The whole thing was supposed to be a secret, until suddenly Tony started bringing Marion home in the second-hand coupe he'd purchased from the dealers on Main Street.

Tony and Marion spent the evenings of their courtship sitting in the lounge with Mum and Dad, watching the TV. When Bobby asked why, Tony said that they had to stay in on account of their saving for a little house. He said it with the strange fatalism of grownups. They often talked about the future as though it was already there.

Sometimes a strange uncle would come around. Dad always turned the TV off as soon as he heard the bell. The uncles were generally fresh-faced and young, their voices high and uneasy. If they came a second time, they usually brought Bobby an unsuitable present, making a big show of hiding it behind their wide backs.

Then Uncle Lew began to visit more often. Bobby overheard Mum and

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Dad talking about how good it would be, keeping the same uncle in the family, even if Lew was a little old for our Tony.

Looking down at him over his cheeks, Lew would ruffle Bobby's hair with his soft fingers.

"And how are you, young man?"

Bobby said he was fine.

"And what is it you're going to be this week?" This was Lew's standard question, a joke of sorts that stemmed from some occasion when Bobby had reputedly changed his mind about his grownup career three or four times in a day.

Bobby paused. He felt an obligation to be original.

"Maybe an archaeologist," he said.

Lew chuckled. Tony and Marion moved off the settee to make room for him, sitting on the floor with Bobby.

After a year and a half of courtship, the local paper that his brother had used to sell his bicycle finally announced that Tony, Marion, and Uncle Lew were marrying. Everyone said it was a happy match. Marion showed Bobby the ring. It looked big and bright from a distance, but, close-up he saw that the diamond was tiny, centered in a much larger stub of metal that was cut to make it glitter.

Some evenings, Dad would fetch some beers for himself, Tony, and Uncle Lew, and let Bobby sip the end of a can to try the flat dark taste. Like most other grownup things, it was a disappointment.

So Tony married Marion. And he never did get around to telling Bobby how it felt to be a grownup. The priest in the church beside the crematorium spoke of the bringing together of families and of how having Uncle Lew for a new generation was a strengthened commitment. Dad swayed in the front pew from nerves and the three whiskies he'd sunk beforehand. Uncle Lew wore the suit he always wore at weddings, battered victim of too much strain on the buttons, too many spilled buffets. There were photos of the families, photos of the bridesmaids, photos of Lew smiling with his arms around the shoulders of the two newlyweds. Photograph the whole bloody lot, Dad said, I want to see where the money went.

The reception took place at home on the lawn. Having decided to find out what it was like to get drunk, Bobby lost his taste for the warm white wine after one glass. He hovered at the border of the garden. It was an undeniably pretty scene, the awnings, the dresses, the flowers. For once, the boundaries between grownups and children seemed to dissolve. Only Bobby remained outside. People raised their glasses and smiled, drunken uncles swayed awkwardly between the trestle tables. Darkness carried the smell of the car exhaust and the dry fields beyond the houses. Bobby

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remembered the time when he had watched from his window and the music had beaten smoky wings, when the grownups had flown over the cherry trees that now seemed so small.

The headlights of the rented limousine swept out of the darkness. Everyone ran to the drive to see Tony and Marion duck into the leather interior. Uncle Lew squeezed in behind them, off with the newlyweds to some secret place. Neighbors who hadn't been invited came out onto their drives to watch, arms folded against the non-existent chill, smiling. Marion threw her bouquet. It tumbled high over the trees and the rooftops, up through the stars. Grownups oohed and ahhed. The petals bled into the darkness. It dropped back down as a dead thing of grey and plastic. Bobby caught it without thinking; a better, cleaner catch than anything he'd ever managed in the playing fields at school. Everyone laughed—that a kid should do that!—and he blushed furiously. Then the car pulled away, low at the back from the weight of the three passengers and their luggage. The taillights dwindled, were cut out by the bend in the road. Dad swayed and shouted something, his breath reeking. People went inside and the party lingered on, drawing to its stale conclusion.

Uncle Lew had Tony and Marion's first child a year later. Mum took Bobby to see the baby at his house when he came out of the hospital a few days after the birth. Uncle Lew lived in town, up on the hill on the far side of the river. Mum was nervous about gradient parking and always used the big pay and display down by the library. From there, you had to cut through the terraced houses, then up the narrowly winding streets that formed the oldest part of town. The houses were mostly grey pebbledash with deepset windows, yellowed lace curtains, and steps leading though steep gardens. The hill always seemed steeper than it probably was to Bobby; he hated visiting.

Uncle Lew was grinning, sitting in his usual big chair by the bay window. The baby was a mewing thing. It smelled of soap and sick. Marion was taking the drugs to make her lactate, and everything was apparently going well. Bobby peered at the baby lying cradled in her arms. He tried to offer her the red plastic rattle Mum had made him buy. Everyone smiled at that. Then there was tea and rock cakes that Bobby managed to avoid. Uncle Lew's house was always dustlessly neat, but it had a smell of neglect that seemed to emanate from behind the old-fashioned green cupboards in the kitchen. Bobby guessed that the house was simply too big for him; too many rooms.

"Are you still going to be an archaeologist?" Uncle Lew asked, leaning forward from his big chair to take both of Bobby's hands. He was wearing a dressing gown with neatly pressed pajamas underneath but for a moment the buttons parted and Bobby glimpsed wounded flesh.

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The room went smilingly silent; he was obviously expected to say more than simply no or yes. "I'd like to grow up," he said, "before I decide."

The grownups all laughed. Then the baby started to cry. Grateful for the distraction, Bobby went out through the kitchen and into the grey garden, where someone's father had left a fork and spade on the crazy paving, the job of lifting out the weeds half-done. Bobby was still young enough to pretend that he wanted to play.

Then adolescence came. It was a perplexing time for Bobby, a grimy anteroom leading to the sudden glories of growing up. He watched the hair grow on his body, felt his face inflame with pimples, heard his voice change to an improbable whine before finally settling on an octave that left him sounding forever like someone else. The grownups themselves always kept their bodies covered, their personal actions impenetrably discreet. Even in the lessons and the chats, the slide-illuminated talks in the nudging darkness of the school assembly hall, Bobby sensed that the teachers were disgusted by what happened to children's bodies, and by the openness with which it did so. The *things* older children got up to, messy tricks that nature made them perform. Periods. Masturbation. *Sex*. The teachers mouthed the words like an improbable disease. Mum and Dad both said Yes they remembered, they knew exactly how it was . . . but they didn't want to touch him any longer, acted awkwardly when he was in the room, did and said things that reminded him of how they were with Tony in his later childhood years.

Bobby's first experience of sex was with May Barton, one afternoon when a crowd of school friends had cycled out to the meadows beyond town. The other children had headed back down to the road whilst Bobby was fixing a broken spoke on his back wheel. When he turned around, May was there alone. It was, he realized afterward, a situation she'd deliberately engineered. She said Let's do it, Bobby. Squinting, her head on one side. You haven't done it before, have you? Not waiting for an answer, she knelt down in the high clover and pulled her dress up over her head. Her red hair tumbled over her freckled shoulders. She asked Bobby to touch her breasts. Go on, you must have seen other boys doing this. Which he had. But still he was curious to touch her body, to find her nipples hardening in his palms. For a moment she seemed different in the wide space of the meadow, stranger almost than a grownup, even though she was just a girl. Here, she said, Bobby, and here. Down on the curving river, a big barge with faded awnings seemed not to be moving. A tractor was slicing a field from green to brown, the chatter of its engine lost on the warm wind. The town shimmered. Rooftops reached along the road. His hand traveled down her belly, explored the slippery heat of her arousal as her own fingers began to part the buttons of his shirt and jeans,

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did things that only his own hands had done before. He remembered the slide shows at school, the teacher's bored, disgusted voice, the fat kids sniggering more than anyone at the back, as though the whole thing had nothing to do with them.

May Barton lay down. Bobby had seen the drawings and slides, watched the mice and rabbits in the room at the back of the biology class. He knew what to do. The clover felt cool and green on his elbows and knees. She felt cool too, strangely uncomfortable, like wrestling with someone who didn't want to fight. A beetle was climbing a blade of grass at her shoulder. When she began to shudder, it flicked its wings and vanished.

After that, Bobby tried sex with several of the other girls in the neighborhood, although he tended to return most often to May. They experimented with the variations you were supposed to be able to do, found that most of them were uncomfortable and improbable, but generally not impossible.

Mum caught Bobby and May having sex one afternoon in the fourth year summer holidays when a canceled committee meeting brought her home early. Peeling off her long white cotton gloves as she entered the lounge, she found them naked in the curtained twilight, curled together like two spoons. She just clicked her tongue, turned and walked back out into the hall, her eyes blank, as if she'd just realized she'd left something in the car. She never mentioned the incident afterward—which was tactful, but to Bobby also seemed unreal, as though the act of sex had made him and May Barton momentarily invisible.

There was a sequel to this incident when Bobby returned home one evening without his key. He went through the gate round the back, to find the French windows open. He'd expected lights on in the kitchen, the murmur of the TV in the lounge. But everything was quiet. He climbed the stairs. Up on the landing, where the heat of the day still lingered, mewing sounds came from his parents' bedroom. The door was ajar. He pushed it wide—one of those things you do without ever being able to explain why—and walked in. It was difficult to make out the partnership of the knotted limbs. Dad seemed to be astride Uncle Lew, Mum half underneath. The sounds they made were another language. Somehow, they sensed his presence. Legs and arms untwined like dropped coils of rope.

It all happened very quickly. Mum got up and snatched her dressing gown from the bedside table. On the bed, Dad scratched at his groin and Uncle Lew made a wide cross with his forearms to cover his womanly breasts.

"It's okay," Bobby said, taking a step back toward the door, taking another. The room reeked of mushrooms. Mum still hadn't done up her

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dressing gown and Bobby could see her breasts swaying as she walked, the dark triangle beneath her belly. She looked little different from all the girls Bobby had seen. Through the hot waves of his embarrassment, he felt a twinge of sadness and familiarity.

"It's okay," he said again, and closed the door.

He never mentioned the incident. But it helped him understand Mum's reasons for not saying anything about finding him in the lounge with May. There were plenty of words for sex, ornate words and soft words and words that came out angry, words for what the kids got up to and special words too for the complex congress that grownups indulged in. But you couldn't use any of them as you used other words; a space of silence surrounded them, walled them into a dark place that was all their own.

Bobby grew. He found to his surprise that he was one of the older kids at school, towering over the chirping freshmen with their new blazers, having sex with May and the other girls, taking three-hour exams at the ends of term, worrying about growing up. He remembered that this had seemed a strange undersea world when Tony had inhabited it; now that he had reached it himself, this last outpost of childhood, it hardly seemed less so.

The strangeness was shared by all the children of his age. It served to bring them together. Bobby remembered that it had been the same for Tony's generation. Older kids tended to forget who had dumped on whom in junior high school, the betrayals and the fights behind the bicycle sheds. Now, every experience had a sell-by date, even if the date itself wasn't clear.

In the winter term, when Bobby was fifteen, the children all experienced a kind of growing up in reverse, an intensification of childhood. There was never any hurry to get home after school. A crowd of them would head into the bare dripping woods or sit on the steps of the monument in the park. Sometimes they would gather at Albee's Quick Restaurant and Take Away next to the bridge. It was like another world outside, beyond the steamed windows, grownups drifting past in cars or on foot, greying the air with breath and motor exhaust. Inside, lights gleamed on red seats and cheap wood paneling, the air smelled of wet shoes and coffee, thinned occasionally by a cold draft and the broken tinkle of the bell as a new arrival joined the throng.

"I won't go through with it," May Barton said one afternoon when the sidewalks outside were thick with slush that was forecasted to freeze to razored puddles overnight.

No one needed to ask what she meant.

"Jesus, it was disgusting!"

May stared into her coffee. That afternoon in biology they had seen

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the last in a series of films entitled The Miracle Of Life. Half way through, the pink and black cartoons had switched over to scenes that purported to come from real life. They had watched a baby tumble wet onto the green sheet from an uncle's open belly, discreet angles of grown-ups making love. That had been bad enough—I mean, we didn't *ask* to see this stuff!—but the last five minutes had included shots of a boy and a girl in the process of growing up. The soundtrack had been discreet, but every child in the classroom had felt the screams.

The voice-over told them things they had read a hundred times in the school biology textbooks that automatically fell open at the relevant pages. Chapter thirteen—unlucky for some, as many a schoolroom wit had quipped. How the male's testicles and scrotal sac contracted back inside the body, hauled up on some fleshy block and tackle. How the female's ovaries made their peristaltic voyage along the fallopian tubes to nestle down in the useless womb, close to the equally useless cervix. A messy story that had visited them all in their dreams.

"Where the hell am *I* supposed to be when all this is going on?" someone asked. "I'm certainly not going to be *there*."

Silence fell around the corner table in Albee's. Every kid had their own bad memory. An older brother or sister who had had a hard time growing up, bloodied sheets in the laundry bin, a door left open at the wrong moment. The espresso machine puttered. Albee sighed and wiped the counter. His beer belly strained at a grey undershirt—he was almost fat enough to be an uncle. Almost, but not quite. Every kid could tell the difference. It was in the way they smelled, the way they moved. Albee wasn't an uncle—he was just turning to fat, some ordinary guy with a wife and kids back at home, and an uncle of his own with a lawn that needed mowing and crazy paving with the weeds growing through. He was just getting through life, earning a living of sorts behind his counter, putting up with Bobby and the rest of the kids from school as long as they had enough money to buy coffee.

Harry, who was a fat kid, suggested they all go down to the bowling alley. But no one else was keen. Harry was managing to keep up a jollity that the other children had lost. They all assumed that he and his friend Jonathan were the most likely candidates in their year to grow into uncles. The complicated hormonal triggers threw the dice in their favor. And it was a well-known fact that uncles had it easy, that growing up for them was a slow process, like putting on weight. But for everyone, even for Harry, the facts of life were closing in. After Christmas, at the start of the new term, their parents would all receive the brown envelopes telling them that the doctor would be around once a week.

The cafe door opened and closed, letting in the raw evening air as the kids began to drift away. A bus halted at the newsstand opposite,

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grownup faces framed at the windows, top deck and bottom, ordinary and absorbed. When it pulled away, streetlight and shadow filled the space behind. Underneath everything, Bobby thought, lies pain, uncertainty, and blood. He took a pull at the coffee he'd been nursing the last half hour. It had grown a skin and tasted cold, almost as bitter as the milk Mum made him drink every morning.

He and May were the last to leave Albee's. The shop windows were filled with promises of Christmas. Colors and lights streamed over the slushy pavement. The cars were inching headlight to brakelight down Main Street, out of town. Bobby and May leaned on the parapet of the bridge. The lights of the houses on the hill where Uncle Lew lived were mirrored in the sliding water. May was wearing mittens, a scarf, a beret, her red hair tucked out of sight, just her nose and eyes showing.

"When I was eight or nine," she said, "Mum and Dad took me on holiday to the coast. It was windy and sunny. I had a big brother then. His name was Tom. We were both kids and he used to give me piggy backs, sometimes tickle me till I almost peed. We loved to explore the dunes. Had a whole world there to ourselves. One morning we were sliding down this big slope of sand, laughing and climbing all the way up again. Then Tom doubled up at the bottom, and I thought he must have caught himself on a hidden rock or something. I shouted Are You Okay, but all he did was groan."

"He was growing up?"

May nodded. "The doc at home had said it was fine to go away, but I realized what was happening. I said You Stay There, which was stupid really, and I shot off to get someone. The sand kept sliding under my sandals. It was a nightmare, running through treacle. I ran right into Dad's arms. He'd gone looking for us. I don't know why, perhaps it's something grownups can sense. He found someone else to ring the ambulance and we went back down the beach to see Tom. The tide was coming in and I was worried it might reach him . . ."

She paused. Darkness was flowing beneath the river arches. "When we got back, he was all twisted, and I knew he couldn't be alive, no one could hold themselves that way. The blood was in the sand, sticking to his legs. Those black flies you always get on a beach were swarming."

Bobby began, "That doesn't . . ." but he pulled the rest of the chilly sentence back into his lungs.

May turned to him. She pulled the scarf down to her chin. Looking at her lips, the glint of her teeth inside, Bobby remembered the sweet hot things they had done together. He marveled at how close you could get to someone and still feel alone.

"We're always early developers in our family," May said. "Tom was the first in his class. I suppose I'll be the same."

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"Maybe it's better . . . get it over with."

"I suppose everyone thinks that it'll happen first to some kid in another class, someone you hardly know. Then to a few others. Perhaps a friend, someone you can visit afterward and find out you've got nothing to say but that it's no big deal after all. Everything will always be *fine*."

"There's still a long—"

"—How long? What difference is a month more or less?" She was angry, close to tears. But beneath, her face was closed off from him. "You had an elder brother who survived, Bobby. Was he ever the same?"

Bobby shrugged. The answer was obvious, all around them. Grownups were *grownups*. They drove cars, fought wars, dressed in boring and uncomfortable clothes, built roads, bought newspapers every morning that told them the same thing, drank alcohol without getting merry from it, pulled hard on the toilet door to make sure it was shut before they did their business.

"Tony was all right," he said. "He's still all right. We were never that great together anyway—just brothers. I don't think it's the physical changes that count . . . or even that that's at the heart of it. . . ." He didn't know what the hell else to say.

"I'm happy as I *am*," May said. "I'm a kid. I feel like a kid. If I change, I'll cease to be *me*. Who wants that?" She took off her mitten, wiped her nose on the back of her hand. "So I'm not going through with it."

Bobby stared at her. It was like saying you weren't going through with death because you didn't like the sound of it. "It can't be *that* bad, May. Most kids get through all right. Think of all the grownups . . . Jesus, think of your own parents."

"Look, Bobby. I know growing up hurts. I know it's dangerous. *I* should know, shouldn't I? That's not what I care about. What I care about is losing *me*, the person I am and want to be. . . . You just don't believe me, do you? I'm *not* going through with it, I'll stay a kid. I don't care who I say it to, because they'll just think I'm acting funny, but Bobby, I thought *you* might believe me. There *has* to be a way out."

"You can. . . ." Bobby said. But already she was walking away.

The envelopes were handed out at school. A doctor started to call at Bobby's house, and at the houses of all his friends. Next day there was always a show of bravado as they compared the bruises on their arms. The first child to grow up was a boy named Arthur Mumford, whose sole previous claim to fame was the ability to play popular tunes by squelching his armpits. In that way that the inevitable always has, it happened suddenly and without warning. One Tuesday in February, just five weeks after the doctor had started to call at their houses, Arthur didn't turn up for registration. A girl two years below had spotted the

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doctor's car outside his house on her paper round the evening before. Word was around the whole school by lunchtime.

There was an unmistakable air of disappointment. When he wasn't performing his party piece, Arthur was a quiet boy: he was tall, and stooped from embarrassment at his height. He seldom spoke. But it wasn't just that it should happen first to someone as ordinary as Arthur—I mean, it has to happen to all of us sooner or later, right? But none of the children felt as excited—or even as afraid—as they had expected. When it had happened to kids in the senior years, it had seemed like something big, seeing a kid they'd known suddenly walking along Main Street in grownup clothes with the dazed expression that always came to new grownups, ignoring old school friends, looking for work, ducking into bars. They had speculated excitedly about who would go next, prayed that it would be one of the school bullies. But now that it was their turn, the whole thing felt like a joke that had been played too many times. Arthur Mumford was just an empty desk, a few belongings that needed picking up.

In the spring, at least half a dozen of the children in Bobby's year had grown up. The hot weather seemed to speed things up. Sitting by the dry fountain outside the Municipal Offices one afternoon, watching the litter and the grownups scurry by, a friend of Bobby's named Michele suddenly dropped her can of drink and coiled up in a screaming ball. The children and the passing grownups all fluttered uselessly as she rolled around on the sidewalk until a doctor who happened to be walking by forced her to sit up on the rim of the fountain and take deep slow breaths. Yes, she's growing up, he snapped, glowering at the onlookers, then down at his watch. I suggest someone call her parents or get a car. Michele was gasping through tears and obviously in agony, but the doctor's manner suggested that she was making far too much of the whole thing. A car arrived soon enough, and Michele was bundled into the back. Bobby never saw her again.

He had similar, although less dramatic, partings with other friends. One day, you'd be meeting them at the bus stop to go to the skating rink. The next, you would hear that they had grown up. You might see them around town, heading out of a shop as you were going in, but they would simply smile and nod, or make a point of saying Hello Bobby just to show that they remembered your name. Everything was changing. That whole summer was autumnal, filled with a sense of loss. In their own grownup way, even the parents of the remaining children were affected. Although there would inevitably be little time left for their children to enjoy such things, they became suddenly generous with presents, finding the cash that had previously been missing for a new bike, a train set, or even a pony.

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May and Bobby still spent afternoons together, but more often now they would just sit in the kitchen at May's house, May by turns gloomy and animated, Bobby laughing with her or—increasingly against his feelings—trying to act reassuring and grownup. They usually had the house to themselves. In recognition of the dwindling classes, the teachers were allowing any number of so-called study periods, and both of May's parents worked days and overtime in the evenings to keep up with the mortgage on their clumsy mock-tudor house.

One afternoon, when they were drinking orange juice mixed with sweet sherry filched from the liquor cabinet and wondering if they dared to get drunk, May got up and went to the fridge. Bobby thought she was getting more orange juice, but instead she produced the plastic flask that contained her bitter milk. She laughed at his expression as she unscrewed the childproof cap and put the flask to her lips, gulping it down as though it tasted good. Abstractly, Bobby noticed that her parents used a brand-name product. His own parents always bought the supermarket's own.

"Try it," she said.

"What?"

"Go on."

Bobby took the flask and sipped. He was vaguely curious to find out whether May's bitter milk was any less unpleasant than the cheaper stuff he was used to. It wasn't. Just different, thicker. He forced himself to swallow.

"You don't just *drink* this, do you?" he asked, wondering for the first time whether her attitude wasn't becoming something more than simply odd.

"Of course I don't," she said. "But I could if I liked. You see, it's *not* bitter milk."

Bobby stared at her.

"Look."

May opened the fridge again, took out a carton of ordinary pasteurized milk. She put it on the counter, then reached high inside a kitchen cabinet, her blouse briefly raising at the back to show the ridges of her lower spine that Bobby so enjoyed touching. She took down a can of flour, a plastic lemon dispenser, and a bottle of white wine vinegar.

"The flour stops it from curdling," she said, "and ordinary vinegar doesn't work. It took me days to get it right." She tipped some milk into a tumbler, stirred in the other ingredients. "I used to measure everything out, but now I can do it just anyhow."

She handed him the tumbler. "Go on."

Bobby tasted. It was quite revolting, almost as bad as the brand-name bitter milk.

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"You see?"

Bobby put the glass down, swallowing back a welcome flood of saliva to weaken the aftertaste. Yes, he saw—or at least, he was *beginning* to see.

"I haven't been drinking bitter milk for a month now. Mum buys it, I tip it down the sink when she's not here and do my bit of chemistry. It's that simple. . . ." She was smiling, then suddenly blinking back tears. ". . . that easy. . . . Of course, it doesn't taste exactly the same, but when was the last time your parents tried tasting bitter milk?"

"Look, May . . . don't you think this is dangerous?"

"Why?" She tilted her head, wiped a stray trickle from her cheek. "What exactly is going to happen to me? You tell me that."

Bobby was forced to shrug. Bitter milk was for children, like cod liver oil. Grownups avoided the stuff, but it was good for you, it *helped.*

"I'm *not* going to grow up, Bobby," she said. "I told you I wasn't joking."

"Do you really think that's going to make any difference?"

"Who knows?" she said. She gave him a sudden hug, her lips wet and close to his ear. "Now let's go upstairs."

Weeks later, Bobby got a phone call from May one evening at home. Mum called him down from his bedroom, holding the receiver as though it might bite.

He took it.

"It's me, Bobby."

"Yeah." He waited for the lounge door to close. "What is it?"

"Jesus, I think it's started. Mum and Dad are out at a steak bar and I'm getting these terrible pains."

The fake bitter milk. The receiver went slick in his hand.

"It can't be. You can't be sure."

"If I was sure I wouldn't be . . . look, Bobby, can you come around?" She gave a gasp. "There is again. You really must. I can't do this alone."

"You gotta ring the hospital."

"No."

"You—"

"No!"

Bobby gazed at the telephone directories that Mum stacked on a shelf beneath the phone as though they were proper books. He remembered that night with Tony, the lights on everywhere, burning though everything as though it wasn't real. He swallowed. The TV was still loud in the lounge.

"Okay," he said. "God knows what I'm supposed to tell Mum and Dad. Give me half an hour."

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His excuse was a poor one, but his parents took it anyway. He didn't care what they believed; he'd never felt as shaky in his life.

He cycled through the housing development. The air rushed against his face, drowning him in that special feeling that came from warm nights. May must have been watching for him from a window. She was at the door when he scooted down the drive.

"Jesus, Bobby, I'm bleeding."

"I can't see anything."

She pushed her hand beneath the waistband of her dress, then held it out. "Look. Do you believe me now?"

Bobby swallowed, then nodded.

She was alone in the house. Her parents were out. Bobby helped her up the stairs. He found an old plastic raincoat to spread across the bed, and helped her to get clean. The blood was clotted and fibrous, then watery thin. It didn't seem like an ordinary wound.

When the first panic was over, he pushed her jumbled clothes off the bedside chair and slumped down. May's cheeks were flushed and rosy. For all her talk about not wanting to grow up, he reckoned that he probably looked worse than she did at that moment. What was all this about? Had she *ever* had a brother named Tom? One who died? She'd lived in another development then. Other than asking, there was no way of knowing.

"I think I'd better go and phone—"

"—Don't!" She forced a smile and reached out a hand toward him. *"Don't."*

Bobby hesitated, then took her hand.

"Look, it's stopped now anyway. Perhaps it was a false alarm."

"Yeah," Bobby said, "False alarm," although he was virtually sure there was no such thing. You either grew up or you didn't.

"I feel okay now," she said. "Really, I do."

"That's good," Bobby said.

May was still smiling. She seemed genuinely relieved. "Kiss me, Bobby," she said.

Her eyes were strange. She smelled strange. Like the river, like the rain. He kissed her, softly on the warmth of her cheek; the way you might kiss a grownup. He leaned back from the bed and kept hold of her hand.

They talked.

Bobby got back home close to midnight. His parents had gone up to bed, but, as he crossed the darkened landing, he sensed that they were both awake and listening beyond the bedroom door. Next morning, nothing was said, and May was at school with the rest of what remained of their class. The teachers had mostly given up on formal lessons, getting

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the children instead to clear out stockrooms or tape the spines of elderly textbooks. He watched May as she drifted through the chalk-clouded air, the sunlight from the tall windows blazing her hair. Neither grownup nor yet quite a kid, she moved between the desks with unconscious grace.

That lunchtime, she told Bobby that she was fine. But Yes, she was still bleeding a bit. I have to keep going to the little girl's room. I've gone through two pairs of underpants, flushed them away. It's a real nuisance, Bobby, she added, above the clatter in the dining hall, as though it was nothing, like hay fever or a cold sore. Her face was clear and bright, glowing through the freckles and the smell of communal cooking. He nodded, finding that it was easier to believe than to question. May smiled. And you *will* come see me tonight, won't you, Bobby? We'll be on our own. Again, Bobby found himself nodding.

He announced to Mum and Dad after dinner that evening that he was going out again. He told them that he was working on a school play that was bound to take up a lot of his time.

Mum and Dad nodded. Bobby tried not to study them too closely, although he was curious to gauge their reaction.

"Okay," Mum said. "But make sure you change the batteries on your lamps if you're going to cycle anywhere after dark." She glanced at Dad, who nodded and returned to his paper.

"You know I'm careful like that." Bobby tried to keep the wariness out of his voice. He suspected that they saw straight through him and knew that he was lying. He'd been in this kind of situation before. That was an odd thing about grownups: you could tell them the truth and they'd fly into a rage. Other times, such as this, when you had to lie, they said nothing at all.

May was waiting at the door again that evening. As she had promised, her parents were out. He kissed her briefly in the warm light of the hall. Her lips were soft against his, responding with a pressure that he knew would open at the slightest sign from him. She smelled even more rainy than before. There was something else too, something that was both new and familiar. Just as her arms started to encircle his back, he stepped back, his heart suddenly pounding.

He looked at her. "Christ, May, what are you wearing?"

"This." She gave a twirl. The whole effect was odd, yet hard to place for a moment. A tartanish pleated dress. A white blouse. A dull necklace. Her hair pulled back in a tight bun. And her eyes, her mouth, her whole face . . . looked like it had been sketched on, the outlines emphasized, the details ignored. Then he licked his lips and knew what it was; the same smell and taste that came from Mum on nights when she leaned over his bed and said, you will be good while we're out, won't you, my darling, jewelry glimmering like starlight around her neck and at the

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lobes of her ears. May was wearing makeup. She was dressed like a grownup.

For a second, the thought that May had somehow managed to get through the whole messy process of growing up since leaving school that afternoon came to him. Then he saw the laughter in her eyes and he knew that it couldn't be true.

"What do you think, Bobby?"

"I don't know why grownups wear that stuff. It isn't comfortable, it doesn't even look good. What does it feel like?"

"Strange," May said. "It changes you inside. Come upstairs. I'll show you."

May led him up the stairs and beyond a door he had never been through before. Even though they were out, her parents' bedroom smelled strongly of grownup, especially the closet, where the dark lines of suits swung gently on their hangers. Bobby was reasonably tall for his age, as tall as many grownups, May's father included.

The suit trousers itched his legs and the waist was loose, but not so loose as to fall down. He knotted a tie over a white shirt, pulled on the jacket. May got some oily stuff from the dresser, worked it into his hair and combed it smooth. Then she stood beside him as he studied himself in the mirror. Dark and purposeful, two strange grownups gazed back. He glanced down at himself, hardly believing that it was true. He pulled a serious face back at the mirror, the sort you might see behind the counter at a bank. Then he started to chuckle. And May began to laugh. It was so inconceivably easy. They were doubled over, their bellies aching. They held each other tight. They just couldn't stop.

An hour later, May closed the front door and turned the dead bolt. Heels clipping the pavement, they walked to the bus stop. Perhaps in deference to their new status as grownups, the next bus into town came exactly when it was due. They traveled on the top deck, which was almost empty apart from a gaggle of cleaning ladies at the back. They were busy talking, and the driver hadn't even bothered to look up when he gave them two straight adult fares (don't say please, May had whispered as the tall lights of the 175 had pulled into the stop, grownups don't do that kind of thing). Dressed in his strange grownup clothes, his back spreading huge inside the jacket shoulder pads, Bobby felt confident anyway. Like May said, the grownup clothes changed you inside.

They got off outside Albee's Quick Restaurant and Take Away. For some reason, May wanted to try visiting a place where they were actually known. Bobby was too far gone with excitement to argue about taking an unnecessary extra risk. Her manner was smooth; he doubted if anyone else would have noticed the wildness in her eyes beneath the makeup. Rather than dodge the cars across the road, they waited for a big gap

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and walked slowly, sedately. The lights of Albee's glowed out to greet them. They opened the door to grownup laugher, the smell of smoke and grownup sweat. People nodded and smiled, then moved to let them through. Albee grinned at them from the bar, eager to please, the way the teachers were at school when the principal came unexpectedly into class. He said Good evening Sir and What'll it be. Bobby heard his own voice say something calm and easy in reply. He raked a stool back for May and she sat down, tucking her dress neatly under her thighs. He glanced around as drinks were served, half expecting the other grownups to float up from their chairs, to begin to fly. They'd been here after school a hundred times, but this was a different world.

It was the same on a dozen other nights, whenever they hit on an excuse that they had the nerve to use on their unquestioning parents. Albee's, they found, was much further from the true heart of the grownup world than they'd imagined. They found hotel bars where real fountains tinkled and the drinks were served chilled on paper coasters that stuck to the bottom of the glass. There were loud pubs where you could hardly stand up for the yellow-lit crush and getting served was an evening's endeavor. There were restaurants where you were offered bowls brimming with crackers and salted nuts just to sit and read the crisply printed menus and say Well Thanks, But It Doesn't Look As Though Our Friends Are Coming And The Baby Sitter You Know. . . . Places they had seen day in and day out through their whole lives were changed by the darkness, the hot charge of car fumes, buzzing street lights, glittering smiles, the smell of perfume, changed beyond recognition to whispering palaces of crystal and velvet.

After changing at May's house back into his sweatshirt and sneakers, Bobby would come home late, creeping down the hall in the bizarre ritual of pretending not to disturb his parents, whom he was certain would be listening open-eyed in the darkness from the first unavoidable creak of the front door. In the kitchen, he checked for new bottles of bitter milk. By the light of the open fridge door, he tipped the fluid down the sink, chased it away with a quick turn of the hot water faucet—which was quieter than the cold—and replaced it with a fresh mixture of spirit vinegar, lemon juice, milk, and flour.

The summer holidays came. Bobby and May spent all their time together, evenings and days. Lying naked in the woods on the soft prickle of dry leaves, looking up at the green latticed sky. Bobby reached again toward May. He ran his hand down the curve of her belly. It was soft and sweet and hard, like an apple. Her breath quickened. He rolled onto his side, lowered his head to lick at her breasts. More than ever before, her nipples swelled amazingly to his tongue. But after a moment her back stiffened.

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"Just kiss me here," she said, "my mouth," gently cupping his head in her hands and drawing it up. "Don't suck at me today, Bobby. I feel too tender."

Bobby acquiesced to the wonderful sense of her around him, filling the sky and the woods. She'd been sensitive about some of the things he did before, often complaining about tenderness and pain a few days before she started her bleeding. But the bleeding hadn't happened for weeks, months.

They still went out some nights, visiting the grownup places, living their unbelievable lie. Sometimes as he left the house, or coming back late with his head spinning from the drink and the things they'd done, Bobby would look up and see Mum's face pale at the bedroom window. But he said nothing. And nothing was ever said. It was an elaborate dance, back to back, Mum and Dad displaying no knowledge or denial, each moment at the kitchen table and the rare occasions when they shared the lounge passing without question. A deception without deceit.

The places they went to changed. From the smart rooms lapped with deep carpets and chrome they glided on a downward flight path through urine-reeking doorways. This was where the young grownups went, people they recognized as kids from assembly at school just a few years before. Bars where the fermented light only deepened the darkness, where the fat uncles sat alone as evening began, looking at the men and the women as the crowds thickened, looking away.

Bobby and May made friends, people who either didn't notice what they were or didn't care. Hands raised and waving through the chaos and empty glasses. Hey Bobby, May, over here, sit yourselves right down here. Place for the old butt. Jokes to be told, lips licked, lewd eyes rolled, skirt hems pulled firmly down then allowed to roll far up again. Glimpses of things that shouldn't be seen. They were good at pretending to be grownups by now, almost better than the grownups themselves. For the purposes of the night, Bobby was in town from a university in the city, studying whatever came into his head. May was deadly serious or laughing, saying my God, you wouldn't believe the crap I have to put up with at the office, the factory, the shop. Playing it to a tee. And I'm truly glad to be here and now with you all before it starts again in the morning.

Time broke in beery waves. The account at the bank that Bobby had been nurturing for some unspecified grownup need sunk to an all-time low. But it could have been worse—they were a popular couple, almost as much in demand as the unattached fat uncles when a few drinks had gone down. They hardly ever had to put in for a round.

The best part was when they came close to discovery. A neighbor who probably shouldn't have been there in the first place, a family friend, a teacher. Then once it was Bobby's brother Tony. Late, and he had his

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arms around a fat uncle, his face sheened with sweat. He was grinning and whispering wet lips close to his ear. There was a woman with them too, her hands straying quick and hard over both of their bodies. It wasn't Marion.

"Let's go," Bobby said. There was a limit to how far you could take a risk. But May would have none of it. She stared straight at Tony through the swaying bodies, challenging him to notice.

For a moment, his eyes were on them, his expression drifting back from lust. Bobby covered his hand with his mouth, feeling the grownup clothes and confidence dissolve around him, the schoolkid inside screaming to get out. Tony made to speak, but there was no chance of hearing. In another moment, he vanished into the mass of the crowd.

Now that the danger had passed, it was the best time of all; catching Tony out in a way that he could never explain. Laughter bursting inside them, they ran out into the sudden cool of the night. May held onto him and her lips were over his face, breathless and trembling from the sudden heightening of the risk. He held tight to her, swaying, not caring about the cars, the grownups stumbling by, pulling her close, feeling the taut rounded swell of her full breasts and belly that excited him so.

"Do you want to be like them?" she whispered. "Want to be a fool and a grownup?"

"Never." He leaned back and shouted it at the stars. "Never!"

Arm in arm, they swayed down the pavement toward the bus stop. Incredibly, Tuesday was coming around again tomorrow; Doc Halstead would be pulling up the drive at home at about eleven, washing his hands one more time and saying How Are You My Man before taking best-china coffee with Mum in the lounge, whispering things he could never quite hear. May's eyes were eager, gleaming with the town lights, drinking it all in. More than him, she hated this world and loved it. Sometimes, when things were swirling, she reminded him of a true grownup. It all seemed far away from that evening in town after biology, leaning on the bridge alone after leaving Albee's and gazing down at the river, May saying I won't go through with it, Bobby, I'm not just some kid acting funny. As though something as easy as fooling around with the bitter milk could make that much of a difference.

Doctor Halstead arrived next morning only minutes after Bobby had finished breakfast and dressed. In the spare bedroom, he spread out his rubber and steel. He dried his hands and held the big syringe up to the light before leaning down.

Bobby smeared the fresh bead of blood over the bruises on his forearm, then licked the salt off his fingertips.

Doctor Halstead was watching the readouts. The paper feed gave a burp and chattered out a thin strip like a supermarket receipt. The doc

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tore it off, looked at it for a moment, and tutted before screwing it into a ball. He pressed a button that flattened the dials, pressed another to make them drift up again.

"Is everything okay?"

"Everything's fine."

The printer chattered again. He tore it off. "You've still got some way to go."

"How many weeks?"

"If I had a dollar for every time I've been asked that question. . . ."

"Don't you *know*?"

He handed Bobby the printout. Faint figures and percentages. The machine needed a new ribbon.

"Us grownups don't know everything. I know it seems that way."

"Most of my friends have gone." He didn't want to mention May, although he guessed Mum had told him anyway. "How long can it go on for?"

"As long as it takes."

"What if nothing happens?"

"Something always happens."

He gave Bobby a smile.

Bobby and May went out again that night. A place they'd never tried before, a few stops out of town, with a spluttering neon sign, a shack motel at the back, and a dusty parking area for the big container rigs. The inside was huge, with bare boards and patches of linoleum, games machines lining the walls, too big to fill with anything but smoke and patches of yellowed silence on even the busiest of nights. Being a Wednesday, and the grownups' pay packets being thin until the weekend, it was quiet. They sat alone in the smoggy space for most of the evening. They didn't know anyone, and for once it seemed that no one wanted to know them. Bobby kept thinking of the way Doctor Halstead had checked the readouts, checked them again. And he knew May had her own weekly test the following afternoon. It wasn't going to be one of their better nights. May looked pale. She went out to the ladies room far more often than their slow consumption of the cheap bottled beer would explain. Once, when she came back and leaned forward to tell him something, he realized that the rain had gone from her breath. He smelled vomit.

At about ten, a fat uncle crossed the room, taking a drunken detour around the chairs.

"Haven't seen you two here before," he said, his belly swaying above the table, close to their faces. "I've got a contract delivering groceries from here to the city and back. Every other day, I'm here."

"We must have missed you."

He squinted down at them, still swaying but now seeming less than

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drunk. For places like here, Bobby and May wore casual clothes. Bobby dressed the way Dad did for evenings at home, in an open-collared striped shirt and trousers that looked as though they had started out as part of a work suit. May hadn't put on much makeup, which she said she hated anyway. Bobby wondered if they were growing complacent, if this fat uncle hadn't seen what all the other grownups had apparently failed to notice.

"Mind if I . . ." The uncle reached for a chair and turned it around, sat down with his legs wide and his arms and belly propped against the backrest. "Where are you from anyway?"

Bobby and May exchanged secret smiles. Now they were in their element, back in the territory of the university in the city, the office, the shop, the grownup places that had developed a life of their own through frequent re-telling.

It was pleasant to talk to an uncle on equal terms for a change, away from the pawings and twittering of other grownups which usually surrounded them. Bobby felt that he had a lot of questions to ask, but the biggest one was answered immediately by this uncle's cautious but friendly manner, by the way he spoke of his job and the problems he was having trying to find an apartment. In all the obvious ways, he was just like any other young grownup. He bought them a drink. It seemed polite to buy him one in return, then—what the hell—a chaser. Soon, they were laughing. People were watching, smiling but keeping their distance across the ranks of empty tables.

Bobby knew what was happening, but he was curious to see how far it would go. He saw a plump hand stray to May's arm—still covered by a long sleeved shirt to hide the bruises—then up to her shoulder. He saw the way she reacted by not doing anything.

"You don't know how lonely it gets," the uncle said, leaning forward, his arm around Bobby's back too, his hand reaching down. "Always on the road. I stay here, you know. Most Wednesdays. A lot of them sleep out in the cab. But they pay you for it and I like to lie on something soft. Just out the back." He nodded. "Through that door, the way you came in, left past the kitchens."

"Will you show us?" May asked, looking at Bobby. "I think we'd like to see."

The motel room was small. Someone had tried to do it up years before, but the print had rubbed off the wallpaper by the door and above the green bed. The curtains had shrunk, and Bobby could still see the parking lot and the lights of the road. A sliding door led to a toilet and the sound of a dripping tap.

The fat uncle sat down. The bed squealed. Bobby and May remained standing, but if the uncle saw their nervousness he didn't comment. He

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seemed more relaxed now, easy with the drink and the certainty of what they were going to do. He unlaced his boots and peeled off his socks, twiddling his toes with a sigh that reminded Bobby of Dad at the end of a hard day. He was wearing a sweatshirt that had once said something. He pulled it off over his head with his hands on the waistband, the way a girl might do, threw it onto the rug beside his feet. He had an undershirt on underneath. The hems were unraveling, but he and it looked clean enough, and he smelt a lot better than Uncle Lew did at close quarters, like unbaked dough. He pulled the undershirt off too. His breasts were much bigger than May's. There was hardly any hair under his arms. Bobby stared at the bruised scar that began under his ribcage and vanished beneath the wide band of his jeans, slightly moist where it threatened to part.

"You're going to stay dressed, are you?" he said with a grin. He scratched himself and the springs squealed some more. "This goddamn bed's a problem."

"We'd like to watch," May said. "For now, if that's okay with you."

"That's great by me. I'm not fussy . . . I mean . . . " he stood up and stepped out of his trousers and underpants in one movement. "Well, you know what I mean."

Under the huge flap of his belly, Bobby couldn't see much of what lay beneath. Just darkness and hair. Every night, he thought, a million times throughout the world, this is going on. Yet he couldn't believe it, couldn't even believe it about his parents with Uncle Lew, even though he'd seen them once on that hot afternoon.

"Tell you what," the uncle said. "It's been a long day. I think you'd both appreciate it if yours truly freshened up a bit." He went over to Bobby, brushed the fine hairs at the back of his neck with soft fingers. "I won't be a mo. You two sort yourselves out, eh?"

He waddled off into the bathroom, slid the door shut behind him. They heard the toilet seat bang down, a sigh, and the whisper of moving flesh. Then a prolonged fart. A pause. A splash. Then another.

May looked at Bobby. Her face reddened. She covered her mouth to block the laughter. Bobby's chest heaved. He covered his mouth too. He couldn't help it: the joke was incredibly strong. Signaling to Bobby, tears brimming in her eyes, May stooped to pick up the sweatshirt, the shoes, the undershirt. Bobby gathered the jeans. There were more clothes heaped in a corner. They took those too, easing the door open as quietly as they could before the laughter rolled them over like a high wind.

They sprinted madly across the parking lot, down the road, into the night.

Next morning, the sky was drab. It seemed to Bobby like the start of

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the end of summer, the first of the grey veils that would eventually thicken to autumn. Downstairs, Mum was humming. He went first into the kitchen, not that he wanted to see her, but he needed to re-establish the charade of them ignoring his nights away from the house. One day, he was sure, it would break, she'd have a letter from the police, the doctor, the owner of some bar, a fact that couldn't be ignored.

"It's you," she said. Uncharacteristically, she kissed him. He'd been taller than her for a year or two, she didn't need to bend down, but it still felt that way. "Do you want anything from the supermarket? I'm off in a few minutes."

Bobby glanced at the list she kept on the wipe-clean plastic board above the stove. Wash pow, toilet pap, marg, lemon juice, wine vinegar. He looked at her face, but it was clear and innocent.

"Aren't you going to go into the dining room? See what's waiting?"

"Waiting?"

"Your birthday, Bobby." She gave him a laugh and a quick, stiff hug. "I asked you what you wanted weeks ago and you never said. So I hope you like it. I've kept the receipt—you boys are so difficult."

"Yeah." He hadn't exactly forgotten, he'd simply been pushing the thing back in his mind, the way you do with exams and visits from the doctor, hoping that if you make yourself forget, then the rest of the world will forget, too.

He was seventeen and still a kid. It was at least one birthday too many. He opened the cards first, shaking each envelope carefully to see if there was any money. Some of them had pictures of archaic countryside and inappropriate verses, the sort that grownups gave to each other. One or two people had made the effort to find a child's card, but there wasn't much of a market for seventeen year olds. The most enterprising had combined stick-ons for 1 and 7. Bobby moved to the presents, using his toast knife to slit the tape, trying not to damage any of the wrapping paper, which Mum liked to iron and re-use. Although she hadn't spoken, he was conscious that she was standing watching at the door. Fighting the sinking feeling of discovering books on subjects that didn't interest him, accessories for hobbies he didn't pursue, model cars for a collection he'd given up years ago, he tried to display excitement and surprise.

Mum and Dad's present was a pair of binoculars, something he'd coveted when he was thirteen for reasons he couldn't now remember. He gazed at the marmalade jar in close up, through the window at the individual leaves of the nearest cherry tree in the garden.

"We thought you'd find them useful when you grew up too," Mum said, putting her arms around him.

"It's great," he said. In truth, he liked the smell of the case—leather, oil and glass—more than the binoculars themselves. But he knew that

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wasn't the point. And then he remembered why he'd so wanted a pair of binoculars, how he'd used to love looking up at the stars.

"Actually, I've lots of stuff to get at the supermarket, Bobby. Dad's taking a half day and we're going to have a party for you. Everyone's coming. Isn't that great?"

Bobby went with Mum to the supermarket. They drove into town past places he and May had visited at night. Even though the sky was clearing to sun, they looked flat and grey. Wandering the supermarket aisles, Mum insisted that Bobby choose whatever he want. He settled at random for iced fancies, paté, green-veined cheese. Tony came out from his office behind a window of silvered glass, a name badge on his lapel and his hair starting to recede. He clapped Bobby's shoulder and said he'd never have believed it, seventeen, my own little brother. They chatted awkwardly for a while in the chill drift of the frozen meats. Even though there was a longer line, they chose Marion's checkout. She was back working at the supermarket part time now that their kid had started nursery school. It wasn't until Bobby saw her blandly cheerless face that he remembered that night with Tony and the other uncle in the bar. He wondered if she knew, if she cared.

There were cars in the driveway at home and spilling along the cul de sac, little kids with names he couldn't remember running on the lawn. The weather had turned bright and hot. Dad had fished out all the deckchairs as soon as he got home, the ordinary ones and the specials he kept for uncles. People kept coming up to Bobby and then running out of things to say. He couldn't remember whether they'd given him cards or presents, what to thank them for. Uncle Lew was in a good mood, the facets of one of the best wine glasses trembling sparks across his rounded face.

"Well, Bobby," he said, easing himself down in his special deckchair. He was starting to look old, ugly. Too many years, too many happy events. He was nothing like the fresh fat uncle at the motel. "And what are you going to be when you grow up?"

Bobby shrugged. He had grown sick of thinking up lies to please people. The canvas of Lew's deckchair was wheezing and slightly torn. Bobby hoped that he'd stay a kid long enough to see him fall through.

"Well, get yourself a nice girlfriend," he said. "It means a lot to me that I'm uncle to your Momma and Poppa *and* to Tony and Marion too." He sucked at his wine. "But that's all up to you."

Looking back up the lawn toward the house, Bobby saw May and her parents emerging into the sunlight from the open French windows. May looked drab and tired. Her belly was big, her ankles swollen.

She waddled over to them, sweat gleaming on her cheeks.

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"Hello, Bobby." She leaned over to let Uncle Lew give her a hug. He put his lips to her ear. She wriggled and smiled before she pulled away.

"Hello, May."

She was wearing a cheap print, something that fell in folds like a tent.

"This whole party is a surprise, isn't it? Your Mum insisted that I didn't say anything when she told me last week. Here. Happy birthday."

She gave him a package. He opened it. Five minutes later, he couldn't remember what it contained.

Dad banged the trestle table and people gathered around on the lawn as he made a speech about how he could hardly believe the way the years had flown, saying the usual things that grownups always said about themselves when it was a child's birthday. He raised his glass. A toast. Bobby. Everyone intoned his name. *Bobby*. The sun retreated toward the rooftops and the trees, filling the estate with evening, the weary smell of cooking. Those grownups who hadn't been able to skip work arrived in their work clothes. Neighbors drifted in.

May came over to Bobby again, her face flushed with the drink and the sun.

"Did the doc come over to see you today?" he asked, for want of anything better. The hilarious intimacy of the things they had done in the night suddenly belonged to a world even more distant than that of the grownups.

"Nothing happened," she said, spearing a piece of herring on the paper plate she carried with a plastic fork. "Nothing ever happens." She took a bite of the herring, then pulled a face. "Disgusting. God knows how the grownups enjoy this shit."

Bobby grinned, recognizing the May he knew. "Let's go somewhere. No one will notice."

She shrugged yes and propped her plate on the concrete bird bath. They went through the back gate, squeezed between the bumpers on the driveway, and out along the road.

"Do you still think you'll never grow up?" Bobby asked.

May shook her head. "What about you?"

"I suppose it's got to happen. We're not fooling anyone, are we, going out, not drinking the milk? I'm sure Mum and Dad know. They just don't seem to care. I mean, we can't be the first kids in the history of the world to have stumbled on this secret. Well, it can't *be* a secret, can it?"

"How about we climb up to the meadows?" May said. "The town looks good from up there."

"Have you ever read *Peter Pan*?" Bobby asked as they walked up the dirt road between the allotments and the saw mill. "He never grew up. Lived in a wonderful land and learned how to fly." He held open the kissing gate that led into the fields. May had to squeeze through. The

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grass was high and slivered with seed, whispering under a deepening sky. "When I was young," he said, "on evenings like this, I used to look out of my bedroom window and watch the grownups. I thought that they could fly."

"Who do you think can fly now?"

"No one. We're all the same."

They stopped to catch their breath and look down at the haze below. Hills, trees, and houses, the wind carrying the chime of an ice-cream van, the river stealing silver from the sky. He felt pain spread though him, then dissolve without finding focus.

May took his hand. "Remember when we came up here alone that time, years ago?" She drew it toward her breast, then down. "You touched me here, and here. We had sex. You'd never done it before." She let his hand fall. Bobby felt no interest. May no longer smelled of rain, and he was relieved that he didn't have to turn her down.

The pain came again, more strongly this time. He swayed. The shimmering air cleared, and for one moment there was a barge on the river, a tractor slicing a field from green to brown, a hawk circling high overhead, May smiling, sweet and young, as she said Let's Do It, Bobby, pulling her dress up over her head. He blinked.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," he said, leaning briefly against her, feeling the thickness of her arms.

"I think we'd better go back."

Down the hill, the pain began to localize. First circling in his spine, then gradually shifting orbit toward his belly. It came and went. When it was there, it was so unbelievable that he put it aside in the moments of recession. Had to be a bad dream. The trees swayed with the rush of twilight, pulling him forward, drawing him back.

Progress was slow. Night came somewhere along the way. Helped by May, he staggered from lamppost to lamppost, dreading the darkness between. People stared, or asked if everything was okay before hurrying on. He tasted rust in his mouth. He spat on the pavement, wiped his hand. It came away black.

"Nearly there," May said, half-holding him around his searing belly.

He looked up and saw houses he recognized, the mailbox that was the nearest one to home. His belly was crawling. He remembered how that mailbox had been a marker of his suffering one day years before when he'd been desperate to get home and pee, and, another time, walking back from school when his shoes were new and tight. Then the pain rocked him, blocking his sight. True pain, hard as flint, soft as drowning. He tried to laugh. That made it worse and better. Bobby knew that this was just the start, an early phase of the contractions.

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He couldn't remember how they reached home. There were hands and voices, furious dialings of the phone. Bobby couldn't get upstairs and didn't want to mess up the settee by lying on it. But the grownups insisted, pushed him down, and then someone found a plastic sheet and tucked it under him in between the worst of the waves. He thrashed around, seeing the TV, the mantelpiece, the fibers of the carpet, the light burning at his eyes. I'm not here, he told himself, this isn't real. Then the biggest, darkest wave yet began to reach him.

Wings of pain settled over him. For a moment without time, Bobby dreamed that he was flying.

Bobby awoke in a chilly white room. There was a door, dim figures moving beyond the frosted glass. He was still floating, hardly conscious of his own body. The whiteness of the room hurt his eyes. He closed them, opened them again. Now it was night. Yellow light spilled through the glass. The figures moving beyond had globular heads, no necks, tapering bodies.

One of the figures paused. The door opened. The silence cracked like a broken seal. He could suddenly hear voices, the clatter of trolleys. He was conscious of the hard flatness of the bed against his back, coils of tubing descending into his arm from steel racks. His throat hurt. His mouth tasted faintly of liquorice. The air smelled the way the bathroom cabinet did at home. Of soap and aspirins.

"Your eyes are open. Bobby, can you see?"

The shape at the door blocked the light. It was hard to make it out. Then it stepped forward, and he saw the soft curve of May's cheek, the glimmer of her eye.

"Can you speak?"

"No," he said.

May turned on a light over the bed and sat down with a heavy sigh. He tried to track her by moving his eyes, but after the brief glimpse of her face, all he could see was the dimpled curve of her elbow.

"This is the hospital?"

"Yes. You've grown up."

The hospital. Growing up. They must have taken him here from home. Which meant that it had been a difficult change.

May said, "You're lucky to be alive."

Alive. Yes. Alive. He waited for a rush of some feeling or other—relief, gratitude, achievement, pride. There was nothing, just this white room, the fact of his existence.

"What happens now?" he asked.

"Your parents will want to see you."

"Where are they?"

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"At home. It's been *days*, Bobby."

"Then why . . ." the taste of liquorice went gritty in his mouth. He swallowed it back. "Why are you here, May?"

"I'm having tests, Bobby. I just thought I'd look in."

"Thanks."

"There's no need to thank me. I won't forget the times we had."

Times. We. Had. Bobby put the words together, then let them fall apart.

"Yes," he said.

"Well." May stood up.

Now he could see her. Her hair was cut short, sitting oddly where her fat cheeks met her ears. Her breasts hung loose inside a T-shirt. Along with everything else about her, they seemed to have grown, but the nipples had gone flat and she'd given up wearing a bra. She shrugged and spread her arms. He caught a waft of her scent: she needed a wash. It was sickly but somehow appealing, like the old cheese that you found at the back of the fridge and needed to eat right away.

"Sometimes it happens," she said.

"Yes," Bobby said. "The bitter milk."

"No one knows really, do they? Life's a mystery."

Is it? Bobby couldn't be bothered to argue.

"Will you change your name?" he asked. "Move to another town?"

"Maybe. It's a slow process. I'm really not an uncle yet, you know."

Still a child. Bobby gazed at her uncomfortably, trying to see it in her eyes, finding with relief that the child wasn't there.

"What's it like?" May asked.

"What?"

"Being a grownup."

"Does anyone ask a child what it's like to be a child?"

"I suppose not."

His head ached, his voice was fading. He blinked slowly. He didn't want to say more. What else was there to say? He remembered waiting stupidly as his brother Tony sat up in bed watching TV that first morning after he'd grown up. Waiting as though there was an answer. But growing up was just part of the process of living, which he realized now was mostly about dying.

May reached out to touch his face. The fingers lingered for a moment, bringing a strange warmth. Their odor was incredibly strong to Bobby. But it was sweet now, like the waft from the open door of a bakery. It hit the back of his palate and then ricocheted down his spine. He wondered vaguely if he was going to get an erection and killed the thought as best he could; he hated the idea of appearing vulnerable to May. After all, she was still half a child.

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"You'd better be going," he said.

May backed away. "You're right." She reached for the handle of the door, clumsily, without looking.

"Goodbye, May," Bobby said.

She stood for a moment in the open doorway. For a moment, the light fell kindly on her face and she was beautiful. Then she stepped back and all her youth was gone.

"Goodbye, Bobby," she said, and glanced down at her wristwatch. "I've got things to do. I really must fly." ●

THE SECOND GENERATION MOLE TALKS OF THE OZONE HOLE

I don't mind the thunder rattling the roof continually
or the lightning flashes that come down the tunnel
like somebody's opened a door at the far end of a hall.
I don't even mind that it never rains after all that;
that's what happens when you rub tropical air
over non-tropical land masses.
You don't need a degree
in Archaeological Meteorology
to know that; it's textbook
ever since the Hole went critical.
So, nothing much but scrub plants grow up there,
and trees are measured in fractions of a man, so what?
Rain forests, meadows, white clouds, chipmunks—
you can't really miss what you never saw,
and life goes on.
We've learned to eat dirt, lay low,
and farm our own waste,
and as for beauty, any time you want,
you can go up the tunnel and watch the lightning
like big fiery cracks in the grayblack sky.

—William John Watkins

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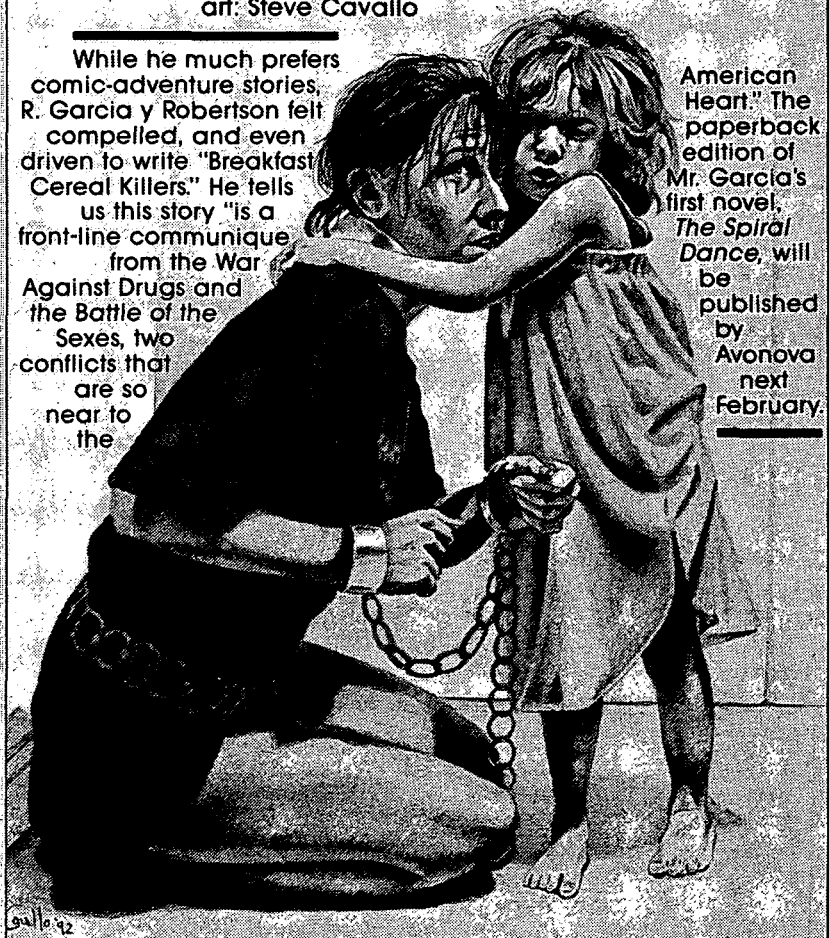
BREAKFAST CEREAL KILLERS

by R. Garcia y Robertson

art: Steve Cavallo



While he much prefers comic-adventure stories, R. Garcia y Robertson felt compelled, and even driven to write "Breakfast Cereal Killers." He tells us this story "is a front-line communique from the War Against Drugs and the Battle of the Sexes, two conflicts that are so near to the

American Heart." The paperback edition of Mr. Garcia's first novel, *The Spiral Dance*, will be published by Avonova next February.

A word of warning: This story contains scenes which may be disquieting to some.

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Lilith got up wanting Wheaties for breakfast. At four and a half, the tiny blonde girl could open the cooler and fill her bowl from the milk spigot, but Wheaties were stowed above the counter. Why grown-ups kept children's cereal in a high locker was one of those mysteries of adulthood that Lilith had not cracked. There was no ladder, no movable furniture in the prefab kitchen. Dad and Debbie were asleep on the floatabed. Isaac was in his loft above the cab. The house was somewhere south of Salt Lake City, headed north, weaving in and out through a stream of thirty-six-wheelers, making good time.

But Lilith had recently solved the problem of the too-high Wheaties. She had discovered where Dad kept the key-card to Rachel's pantry; clipped to the underside of the low chrome table. Sliding the key-card into its slot, she popped the pantry open.

Rachel was inside, sitting up, knees tucked, hands in front of her, cuffed to a chain about her waist. She was a pale undernourished nineteen-year-old, wearing nothing but a shiny collar and a black T-shirt with SAY NO TO DRUGS printed on it in white block letters. Dark hair fell down over her blindfold.

"Is that you, Lily-butt?" Rachel was awake, but the blindfold was a good one, a black stretch-plastic band that molded to her face.

"Yeah." Lilith climbed into her lap.

"Scratch my nose."

Lilith scratched Rachel's nose. Why Rachel had to sleep blindfolded, chained so that she could not scratch her nose, was another of those adult mysteries. Lilith filed it along with the problem of the too-high Wheaties.

"I want cereal." Lilith finished scratching and gave Rachel a hug.

"Okay, honey, fix my collar."

Little fingers felt around at the nape of Rachel's neck, finding the connections on the teenager's plasti-metal collar. Debbie had shown Lilith how to disable the collar. Debbie was five years older than Lilith, infinitely wiser in the ways of adults—she had used the house computer to break the collar's control code.

With her collar disabled, Rachel could feel her way out of the pantry. She had no problem navigating the kitchen blindfolded, and boosted Lilith up onto the counter. "Get me a cleaning pad too, honey-butt."

She could hear Lilith scampering about atop the counter. Rachel wondered, what will happen when Lilith is big enough to get onto the counter on her own? Will she stop letting me out in the mornings? Will I lose this precious addition to the day?

Lilith came back with the Wheaties, a spoon, and a cleaning pad.

Rachel helped her down, and opened the foil seal on the cereal pack. Lilith poured the Wheaties onto her soy-milk. Getting down on her knees,

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Rachel scrubbed under the table with the cleaning pad. It was hard to do a proper job blindfolded, with her hands cuffed, but she worked by touch, feeling out the nooks and corners where she *knew* dirt collected. Like between the knobs on the nonslip floor. It was never too early to start her tasks. By getting a headstart, she could have more time with the kids later on.

While she worked, they whispered back and forth. "What time is it, Lily?"

"Morning."

"What can you see outside?"

Lilith looked up. Sunblasted Utah desert whipped past the kitchen windows. Dunes faded from gold in the foreground to distant purple; rock spires stood out against the hot blue-dawn sky. Windows were always kept at max polarization, to cut the glare and keep passing wheelers from seeing inside. "Sand. Lots of sand. Some pretty rocks."

That sounded like southern Utah. The house was headed home, after spending the summer at a toxic dump near Flagstaff. It was a late-model Penturban Pioneer, one and one-half bedrooms, one bath, with a kitchenette, salon, workstation, and dual cyber-manual controls. Recycling, hydro-celled and solar powered, the house ran on water and sunlight.

When she had a jump on the cleaning, Rachel decided to risk using the toilet, keeping the door open to talk to Lilith.

She heard the child set down her spoon. "Isaac's awake."

In a blind scramble, Rachel got off the toilet and back into the pantry. "Fix my collar, hon. Then shut the door. And flush for me—Please."

Lilith shut the pantry, slipped the key-card back under the table, and dived into the bathroom. She flushed. Then walked calmly back to her bowl of Wheaties.

Isaac scowled at her. He was a dark lanky eleven-year-old, wearing a Disney World T-shirt, baggy shorts, and a shuttle captain's cap. He picked up the Wheaties pack, putting it back in the overhead locker, and returned the cleaning pad to its place. "Don't think you're fooling me. If Dad ever catches you, you're gonna be fuckin' sorry."

Lilith squished Wheaties with her spoon.

Dad and Debbie came out of the bedroom. Father Abram looked a little like the face on Lilith's copper penny; he was tall and gaunt, with a scraggly beard and big gnarled hands. Thinning hair brushed the luminous ceiling panels. Debbie was nine, almost ten, with long black hair and huge intense eyes. She kept her arms inside her shift, hugging her small breasts.

Abram ruffled Lilith's blonde curls. "Howdy, Angel, fixed yourself breakfast again? That's great."

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He took the key-card from under the table and opened Rachel's pantry, adjusted her collar, unchained her, and removed the blindfold. "Make breakfast."

After fourteen hours of darkness, the polarized desert morning stabbed at her eyes. Rachel looked down instinctively. She was never, never allowed to make eye-contact with Abram, unless he told her to. Alone in the pantry, she imagined Abram with animal eyes. Flat. Cold. Uncaring. But whenever she snuck a look, they were so godawful normal it made her want to gag.

Able to see and use her hands, she worked quickly, cleaning spots she had missed, asking Debbie and Isaac what they wanted.

"Kelp cakes."

"No, egg tofu."

She made both. If Abram wanted anything, he would tell her. Behind his back, she touched the girls in silent affection. She wished she could do the same for Isaac, but lately the boy was too unpredictable. Rachel did not dare fondle him in Abram's presence. The void between her and Isaac was growing, and she did not know how to reach across it. But she would try. Later, when Abram was distracted.

Rachel stole glances out the window. Southern Utah was lovely desolate country—natural arches, coral pink sands, vermilion cliffs, twisted greenery, and primeval beauty. All she would see was snatches.

She heard Debbie baiting Isaac over kelp cakes and egg tofu. "You're cranked out because I whomped you at Gulf War." Rachel hated to hear them go at each other. It was like the best part of the day was already gone.

"I should have won," Isaac insisted. "But one of my smart bombs hit a bus."

"Then it wasn't very smart."

"They shouldn't count collateral damage against you—not if it's *enemy* civilians."

"I'll spot you five thousand civilian dead and *still* beat you."

"Ten thousand."

"Nope, the first five thousand you fry are free and clear. Take it or no."

All Abram wanted was coffee. He told her, "Set up a 3-V for the children, then come to the bedroom." He took his coffee with him.

Shivering, Rachel herded the children into the workstation, setting the Pioneer's mainframe for feelie stimulation. This was what she had feared, why she had started work early. By now, she almost *knew* when Abram would want her. Couldn't the bastard hold on a bit? Patience was a fucking *virtue*.

The girls begged for Peter Pan, their favorite 3-V. Isaac held out for Hansel and Gretel, or at least Sleeping Beauty. The Penturban Pioneer

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was hardwired for single channel stimulations. Next year's model was multichannel.

"Rumpelstiltskin," suggested Debbie.

Isaac countered with Snow White.

Until she had to referee these 3-V debates, Rachel never realized how many bad stepmothers, evil queens, and wicked witches there were in children's feelies. Isaac knew them all.

"Dumbo." Debbie tried to compromise.

"Cinder-fucking-rella."

She got them to agree on Bambi. Neutral ground. Hands shaking, she adjusted Lilith's glittering crown of electrodes and color-coded dermals, nervously cleaning the contacts on her T-shirt.

"Don't be scared, Mom." Lilith put her small hand up to steady Rachel. "Bambi's only makebelieve. His mother doesn't *really* die."

"Don't you dare call her Mom," Isaac glared, fixing his own headset. "She's just a dopehead. A dirty mallhopper Dad brought home. Your *Mom's* name was Jo Anne."

"Isaac's right." She petted Lilith. "Your real Mom's name was Jo Anne. But I love you all anyway." She gave Isaac a significant look.

"And don't call her Rachel," the boy demanded. "Her name is *Hagar*." He slipped the silver blinders over his eyes.

She punched a key, and they were in Bambiland. Lost behind 3-V blinders. Rachel saw three images of herself reflected in the mirror finish on the headsets. She rose and went slowly to the bedroom, smothering the sick horror in her stomach. Anticipation was awful. Almost paralyzing. But her choke collar gave her no choice.

Abram was already naked, white hairy hips half-sunk in the silver floatabed. A high voltage taser lay within convenient reach. He had his own headset on, jacked into a stimcorder, recording the session.

Calling her Hagar, he told her to take off her SAY NO TO DRUGS T-shirt. She did, watching him wad it up and toss it in a corner. Then he blindfolded her again. Abram never let her look at him when he was doing things to her. Heaven knows why. Somehow it spoiled the fun.

Back in blackness, she thought about the children. Lilith still had to be bathed and brushed. Debbie needed help with video-school. She prayed Isaac would not tell Abram about Lilith letting her out. Worse than punishment was the thought of losing mornings with Lilith. She could not imagine Isaac hurting her that much.

Abram gagged her. She started humming frantically to herself, a silly old song they played in the Malls, by a guy named Simon Garfunkel. It was about Jesus, Joe DiMaggio, and hiding it from the kids.

He put plasti-metal cuffs on her wrists and ankles, telling them to tighten.

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The house drove on, showing mirrorshade windows to the world, past the barren remains of the Bonneville Sea, the Salt Flats, the Great Salt Lake, the malls of Ogden and Brigham City, on into Idaho.

An endless time later, Rachel sat in her pantry, naked, blindfolded, but unchained. She heard the door open, felt the brush of air. Lilith crawled into her lap.

"Morning already, Lily?"

"No, Mom," Lilith laughed. "It's only lunchtime."

She gave the little girl a fierce awkward hug, using her knees and elbows. Isaac was right. She was not their Mom. But she loved to hear Lilith say the word, not caring that it was a lie. "Debbie's gonna have to fix lunch, Lily-butt."

"Why?"

"I can't use my hands or feet."

"Why?"

"They're numb. No feeling."

"Why?"

"It will go away. It always does." She kissed Lilith and let her go. "Tell Debbie to make lunch."

Rachel recovered in time to micro rice and krill flakes for dinner. She watched the recycler swallow the leftovers, then sat down to tutor Debbie. Not that Debbie *needed* tutoring. Debbie was the star of video-school. At nine, she was light years ahead of where Rachel had been when she'd hit *erase* on her own education and started mallhopping. Just tracking Debbie had introduced Rachel to subjects she never dreamed existed—biocybernetics, linguistics, post-quantum physics, cosmology.

But lately Debbie had been doing badly, refusing even to try unless Rachel was at her shoulder. Abram was not pleased.

So they sat at parallel terminals. Debbie working, Rachel watching. To pass the time, Rachel played with her keyboard, one finger hovering over ERASE. She punched in her full name and ID number, then pressed SEARCH.

Instantly she was presented with her picture, age, sex, height, weight, date of birth, hair and eye color. The most vital statistic was printed in red caps. "MISSING MORE THAN FOUR YEARS." Anyone who saw her was supposed to immediately punch a twenty-four-hour emergency number. Rachel knew the number by heart. In the black pantry, she had made it her mantra. Repeating the number until her mind went numb.

But her terminal was locked in read-only mode. Pleas for help always brought the same response from video-school: INCORRECT. THE CORRECT ANSWER IS . . . It was as pointless as appealing to the slick 3-V promos on a mall channel—tanned swimsuited holograms who tried to sell her spa vacations. If she wasn't buying, they weren't listening. The

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house had no open modems, no CB, no cellphone. Abram never let her within shouting distance of a pay phone or public terminal.

She stared at her description and age-enhanced holo. They had her height right to within a centimeter, but they were a few kilos optimistic about her current weight. A cheerful, well-fed nineteen-year-old smiled back at her. Maybe that smile was also optimism. More likely they figured she was dead. Such records were mainly reminders. Here was the young woman she *might* have been, what she *would have looked like*—if Rachel Nicolle Silversteen had not been snatched off a slidewalk at age fifteen.

Rachel punched in a police code that Debbie had weaseled out of the system. Now the face and description had a criminal record. Not much. Slidewalk violations. Bad marks on her drug tests. Chronic truancy. A shoplifting rap that would have been erased if she had lived to be eighteen. But there was enough to make a person nod, "Oh yeah, Rachel Silversteen ended up right where she was headed."

Discovering that the victim had a drug record made homicide cops feel better, and juries more likely to acquit. Needle pocks on the corpse could take years off a mallhawk's sentence. It wasn't fair. She flipped through the system. More faces. Most were computer-advanced into a weird, ghostly adulthood. Not all were mallhoppers and dopeheads. She pulled one without a rap sheet. Marybeth Burke, brown and brown, sex female, age three. NO KNOWN DRUG USE. Lost in America. What had *Marybeth* done, for Christ's sake? Rachel fought back tears.

Abram stepped into the workstation. Her finger stabbed down. The terminal went blank.

The house rolled on, crossing and recrossing the Snake. This was the Inland Empire, the Aryan Nation. Being stopped and turned back by skinheads was the least of Rachel's worries. Abram was white and Christian. Heck, if outback Nazis *did* find his Jew in hiding, the worst Abram would get was a wink and a pat on the back.

Into Eastern Oregon. Down the Columbia. They had spent summers here, winters too—the Columbia River brimmed with toxic dumps. Then up the ladder of counties. Cowlitz, Lewis, Thurston, Pierce, King, Snohomish, and home.

Neighbors threw a homecoming potluck for Abram. Rachel contributed her specialty, cabbage-egg piroshki, with caraway and horseradish. In return, she was gagged and bound especially tight throughout the party—but that was normal when Abram had people over. By now Rachel thoroughly hated company.

Curled in darkness, she was semi-entertained by snatches of conversation. Mrs. Castle came into the kitchen to help clean up and to flirt with Abram.

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"The piroshki was divine. For a single man, you can definitely cook."

"A single man *has* to cook. If he wants to eat."

Rachel pictured Abram's easy smile. Mrs. Castle was making a *serious* mistake hitting on Abram, unless her idea of a casual date was being raped, strangled, and buried in a landfill. But Rachel did not really expect that to happen—more likely, he would get all tuned up over Mrs. Castle, then work it off by walloping the hell out of *her*. She had long ago given up the hope that Abram would develop outside interests, or a more normal sex life.

Sealed in with only her thoughts, she had hours and hours in which to analyze Abram. She was free to hate him, to loathe him, to fear him. To wonder at the mean compulsiveness that made her wear a blindfold *inside* a black pantry.

"But what about that girl who babysits for you? Does she cook?" Mrs. Castle was no dummy. She had seen right through the cabbage piroshki.

"Hagar?" Abram's confident baritone did not falter. "She's in California. Visiting her folks."

California was their code name for being locked in the pantry. Good enough to fool Mrs. Castle, but it gave Lilith fits. Lilith reacted with indignant disbelief every time she heard references to Disney Land, Hollywood, and any other place pretending to be in the pantry with Rachel.

Like any well-balanced functioning psychopath, Abram had learned to hide and cope, to deal with his disease while he held down a job and raised his kids. He had a useful career in toxic cleanup, and freelanced as a security consultant—"Drug rehab and juvenile offenders." He could afford a late-model home. Outwardly, Abram had mastered his sickness. Only Rachel didn't think much of his method of coping. And she knew that he planned to pass his disease on to his children. Isaac for sure. Debbie and Lilith if he could.

A week or so later, Rachel got to see Mrs. Castle face-to-face. Abram had let her out to keep an eye on the girls. An accomplished kidnapper himself, Abram was always careful with his children. Rachel's choke collar kept her from leaving the property. Debbie did scales on her viola. Lilith played in the dirt.

Home was a flat concrete pad in the bare foothills above the floodplain of the Skagit. The land had been cut and recut in the last frantic rush to chop every stick of timber in Washington State. Now it supported cement pads, for houses that came and went.

Below her, Rachel could see the Skagit, cutting wide slalom curves through megafarm floodplain. Huge harvester combines crawled like angular green beetles over fields that grew vegetables in the fall, tulips in the spring.

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Razor-sharp through the farmland ran the I-5 corridor, a fiber optic line of malls, holodomes, feelie arcades, drug emporiums, and body boutiques, served by slidewalks, bullet rails, and people movers. It glowed even in daylight. In the old days, the towns along the corridor had names—Conway, Mount Vernon, Burlington—but now it was just the Malls. A strip of civilization, running from Vancouver to Portland, and points south.

Rachel gloried in being outside, in the open, tasting bitterness and gratitude. Gratitude because Abram was letting her out. Bitterness, because such outings were becoming rarer. When she was first kidnapped, when the kids were younger, they used to go out a lot more. Abram would take them to the big waste dumps around Richland, where they could camp in the open. The kids would play, and Rachel would watch them. Abram would barbecue. She could be outside all day. An almost normal life, reminding Rachel of her abbreviated childhood.

They never did fun stuff like that anymore. At Flagstaff, she had spent the whole summer inside. Locked in the pantry when Abram went to work—taking the key-card with him—only let out to cook, clean, or to be raped and tormented. Some summer. As much as Rachel hoped that life might get better, things were undeniably worse.

Mrs. Castle biked up to say hi, scaring the shit out of Rachel, who had not heard her neighbor coming. The woman was suddenly beside her, dressed in a butter-tan jacket and plastic snakeskin pants, leaning on a Suzuya multispeed, a new model, solar-assisted. She was as thin as Rachel, with done-up red hair. Very pretty, in a well-preserved sort of way. "Did you enjoy California?"

Rachel shrugged. She hardly knew how to answer. Certainly not with the truth. On walks, Abram monitored her, audio and visual. A single keystroke and the collar would close around her throat, cutting off her voice, strangling her. He probably had a bead on Mrs. Castle, too. Abram owned a Tokarev recoilless assault rifle that fired light hollowpoint rockets—an evil messy weapon, impossible to trace ballistically. Got it at a swapmeet. He swore that if Rachel ever said the wrong word to a neighbor, he would kill them both. "I'll do my damnedest to make it look like a drive-by shooting. Blame it on Dealers."

And it would happen in full view of Debbie and Lilith. Not the way Rachel would pick to commit suicide. If she did die horribly, she desperately did *not* want it to be in front of the kids.

"I don't much care for California, either." Mrs. Castle gave her a girl-to-girl wink. "And visiting home can be a lot like going to jail."

Rachel replied with an idiot grin. God, Mrs. Castle must think she was feeble-minded.

Mrs. Castle returned her smile, cheerful as all hell. Striving to be chummy. "I can always spot you because of your T-shirt."

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Rachel felt embarassed. Her SAY NO TO DRUGS T-shirt was the only piece of clothing Abram allowed her. He liked her legs, hips, and pubic hair exposed. She had to borrow a pair of Isaac's pants just to take the girls outside. They were way too tight, and the zip would not close. She kept hiking them up with one hand.

"But I can't believe such a sweet girl ever touched drugs."

"Oh, no, ma'am." Here was a safe subject. "I was a mallhopper. A real bouncing pharmacy. I popped everything I could lift. Took whatever guys would give me."

"But you look so normal now. Working for Mr. Abram must have straightened you out."

"Yes, indeed, straight as an induction strip. Got no time for drugs today."

"Too bad every girl running loose in the Malls can't be as lucky as you."

"Yes, ma'am. Too bad." It was the only answer that would not get Mrs. Castle perforated.

They went on about what a great guy Abram was. Rachel laid it on heavy and wide, playing to her silent audience, stroking Abram's ego, while trying to make Mrs. Castle look like a complete airhead. Not worth snatching. Seeing the two of them together was just the sort of thing to really tune Abram up. Mrs. Castle would pedal on home. But Rachel would have to suffer through any fantasies two women evoked.

Every so often, the house would leave its pad and crawl up the old freeway to Concrete, through Sedro-Woolley, Lyman, and Hamilton. The Malls did not stretch upriver; this steeper part of the valley was filled with tiny organic farms. Tarheels lived in dilapidated houses that would never move again.

Above Concrete, the house parked on a clearcut in the Mount Baker National Forest. The New Homestead Act allowed families to apply for free three-hundred-year leases on former forestry land, as long as they worked to restore 90 percent of the property to its original condition. Abram had snapped up a lease. When he was not cleaning toxic dumps, he would bring the family up here. The girls played. Rachel, Isaac, and Abram tended trees, replanted eroded slopes, cleaned the streambeds.

Good work, and Rachel loved it. When there was nothing to be done she would jog for exercise, and the joy of using her legs. She had to jog in circles, because her choke collar would not let her go far.

When she stopped, she would stand panting, watching her breath puff out in the crisp fall air. She could see for an endless distance. Thanks to scientific timber management, the Mount Baker National Forest seemed to be about shoulder high.

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Abram and Isaac were talking. Abram liked to talk loud enough for her to hear, never letting her take part in the conversation. It tuned him up to treat her like she had nothing to say. Like she was only there to be hurt.

He was talking to Isaac about the land, and what it used to be like, shaded by cathedral forest, with trout and salmon in the streams. If they worked hard, it could be that way again. "We won't see it, but our grandchildren's grandchildren will."

Isaac's reply was low and surly. "How soon can I have *her?*"

She felt their gaze, but did not dare look. Instead she stood motionless, breathing hard.

"Her? You mean Hagar?" She heard pride of possession in Abram's voice, like when he talked about the house, or the land. "Of course you can have her. One day. I just don't think you're ready for that yet."

"I'm ready."

"Physically, maybe. But I don't want you getting into women too soon. There are more important things in life, much more important. The pleasure you get from women is passing." Abram never laid it out for her patiently, completely, the way he did for Isaac. With her it was all show and tell.

"That's why Hagar is perfect. She does what I need, and never says no. Not once. You'll find that damn rare in females. Hagar leaves you free. And one day I'll share her with you."

She heard him pat Isaac's knee. "Don't fret. Hagar's not going anywhere."

Head down, she started running again, in smaller tighter circles.

Debbie failed her video-exams. It came like a bolt from Heaven. Not just the hard stuff either, but everything. Even things a normal fourth grader would know.

Abram called Rachel into the bedroom, cuffed her hands behind her, and told her to explain. Kneeling at the foot of the floatabed, she stared at the astroturf tatami mats—always fresh and green, smelling like spring. She had no explanation. No safe and easy one anyway. "Debbie is unhappy," was all she dared say.

"Why?"

Trying to have a two-way conversation with Abram was a lot like talking to Lilith. Both were used to getting their way, and had little patience with outside reality. She wanted to say, "Look, you fucker, Debbie is reacting badly to seeing her primary role model gagged and shackled." Or emerging with bruises from the family floatabed. Debbie was searching for safe ways to rebel. Refusing to study. Fighting with Isaac.

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"She is growing up."

"So."

"She needs to get out more. To be with kids her age." When Debbie was younger, she had actually had more freedom, more outings. She had gone to sleepovers. Special classes. Gotten dance lessons. But as she had come to understand what was happening at home, Abram had to tighten up. He could no longer let her out unsupervised. Couldn't have her telling the pajama party that Dad kept a teenager chained in the pantry. Rachel's imprisonment inevitably extended to include Debbie.

"And because of this, she is failing on purpose?"

Rachel clasped her hands hard, staring at the plastic tatami. That was what she feared most. Abram would not brook "willful disobedience." Not from her. Not from Debbie.

"No, she's just confused." The *no* was out of her mouth before she could call it back.

"Get on the bed. You are going to be punished." Abram always had the last word in these discussions.

He blindfolded and gagged her. She started humming to herself again, wondered if Heaven really held a place for those who prayed. If it didn't, then the whole thing was a rip. During the last four years, she had prayed her head off, and so far it had not done her a fucking bit of good.

This time he put the plasti-metal bands at her hips and shoulders. A few minutes of pressure and her limbs felt dead. No feeling. They just flopped around on the floatabed whenever Abram moved her. He got on top of her and told the choke collar to tighten.

She was strangling. No longer able to hum. Or think of the kids. Just hurting. Hearing the white-noise crackle that meant she was passing out. She could not tell if Abram was inside her, or atop her, or just watching and enjoying. All her consciousness was in her constricted throat. Abram had promised punishment. And Abram kept his promises. He'd sworn he'd drive the drugs out of her and make her obey—and now she could hardly remember what it felt like to be high.

Finally, even that horrible pressure faded. She was too near to death to suffer. All she could sense or feel was that long tunnel, with the light at the end. When he was done with her, she guessed Abram had saved her life a half-dozen times, just by easing up on the collar.

He told her he would not tolerate another failure. Rachel understood. Debbie had breezed past calculus, suddenly she could not do improper fractions. Video-school would want to know why. They would send a live teacher out to talk to Debbie, maybe even contact Child Protective Services. The last thing Abram wanted was to have to discuss the home environment with Debbie and a mental health caseworker from CPS.

He let her know that even a courtesy call from CPS would be her death

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warrant, then he showed Rachel a small shiny tube with wires at each end and a switch in the middle. He was forever coming up with newer and fancier forms of torture. This one looked horrid.

"This is a filter. Bought it off a hacker. To make your keystroke signature match Debbie's."

Video-school limited cheating by flashing fast random problems demanding long answers. No two people had identical keyboard styles. With a complete file on Debbie going back to home-kindergarten, they could chart response time, error frequency, keyboard speed, word usage, to make sure *she* was typing, and to spot dictated answers. If they suspected that she was being overcoached, they would test her away from the home.

Abram always monitored Debbie's exams, suspicious of any signals going out of the house, but this hacker claimed to have completely beaten the system. Maybe he had. Video-school was not Fort Knox. They assumed you wanted your child educated.

Since Debbie would not study, Rachel had to. But she was delighted to find that the gleaming metal tube with the switch and wires was her key to the pantry. She had to struggle to match the work of a child genius. There was hardly time for her to be locked up, or even taken to the bedroom. If her hands did not work, she could not type.

Poor Abram had to replay past pleasures, or rent Brazilian snuff feelies. Torturing electronic ghosts.

It was steep. Rachel never could have done it if Debbie had not been willing to coach her. But Debbie was willing, even eager, as long as she did not have to touch the keys. They would sit for hours, side by side. Roles reversed. As far as video-school was concerned, Debbie had gotten dumber, but not alarmingly so. Rachel found she could work consistently above ninth grade level. A novel experience. Nor did studying have that old boredom. Video-school was incredibly exciting, compared to being locked blindfolded in a box.

All Debbie wanted to do was mallhop. When Abram was not around, they would ditch video-school and roam through local mall security systems. Debbie had the knack for electronic breaking and entry. By tapping security cams, they could wiz along on 3-V trips from Burlington to Vancouver, or down to Lynwood and through the Emerald City, hopping from slidewalk to slidewalk, pretending to jimmy free trips by bullet rail.

People poured past the cams. Rosh Hashanah shoppers. Straight families paused at rolex displays, to ogle bright expensive toys. Kids weaved by on slideboards. Rachel scanned for eddies of color in the stream of blank faces.

"See that guy with the green skintone and wraparound glasses? Got

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Dealer printed all over him." She zoomed in on fat pink triangles changing hands.

"What about that one?"

"Nah, just a nark, trying too hard to look hip."

It all came back. "Here, watch this girl. She's scored. Looking for a spot to load up." The girl was nervous, hoping to be inconspicuous. Rachel knew just how hard that was in neon hair and a see-through bra. "There's the swallow. Have fun, honey."

She used the 3-V to simulate drug effects, fast forward for amphetamines, slow and fuzzy for downers, variable focus for psychedelics and hallucinogens.

Rachel's last free moments came back in hot sharp detail. She had just dropped, and was moving fast. In that wild, ecstatic, happy state where anything is possible, everything is new. Gyrating store logos winked at her. Larger than life holos were doing amazing things. She flitted in and out of fashion boutiques, letting laser imagers dress her in every conceivable outfit.

Seeing a best girlfriend whiz by on a northbound slidewalk, she leaped the fluorescent barrier.

A man's hand grabbed her. It was Abram, saying he was mall security. In her elevated state, she never doubted it for a nanosecond. He looked, talked, and walked like the K-mart KGB. Her girlfriend faded.

Oh, Christ. Busted again—she came crashing down—gonna flunk another drug test, and not do well on the strip search. She had enough pills in her underwear to fast-forward her to next Tuesday.

"Don't you know that a slidewalk, even an empty one, can be *extremely* dangerous. . . ."

The stern lecture did not let her get a protest in. But she could still taste the leap of joy when Abram hinted he would waive the drug test. No drug test meant no strip search. He was even going to knock 5kph off the slidewalk speed, to keep it a simple violation. All she had to do was step into his "mobile unit" and thumb-print a statement about hopping the barrier.

That was almost five years ago. She was still in that fucking mobile unit.

"How about him, the rasta with the tinsel dreadlocks?" Debbie brought her back to today's mallhopping.

"Yep. Definitely holding. You got a max career opportunity in mall security." Like father, like daughter.

It was great to mallhop again, even in 3-V. She could almost *smell* the heady mall aroma, a mix of cleaning fluid, fast food, and French fragrances. But she kept feeling like she was shorting Debbie. Rachel tried

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to coax her into studying. Though if Debbie ever got over her test phobia, it would be back to blindfold and pantry for Rachel.

Debbie would have none of it. She studied mallhopping with the same passionate intensity that had gotten her through organic chemistry and the viola. The girl who played the meanest cleanest game of Gulf War homed in on the action like a Tomahawk hitting an office building—determined to know everything there was about shoplifting, scamming drugs, and dodging cams, the fine art of mall survival.

Rachel tried to rub any glitter off. "It's horribly gritty. Carbon-steel characters live off of mallhoppers." Look what happened to *me*.

They were alone. The house was locked down. Abram had Isaac, Lilith, and the key-cards. Open cartons from a Polynesian take-out place sat between them on the console. Debbie gave her the deep, searching look of a child daring to trust an adult. "Come into the cab."

Debbie had made the glistening aluminum cab hers. As long as Abram had the key-cards, there was no chance of starting the house up, but Debbie seemed to enjoy even inert circuitry.

She bent down by the driver's nacelle, produced one of Lilith's toys, and used it to pop an access hatch. Lifting out microchip boards, she used the same toy to pop a maintenance panel. Rachel reached through and touched the cold dark ferro-concrete underneath the house. The hole was way too small for her. Tight and twisty even for Debbie, more Lilith-sized. But it led outside. There was still a fiberglass apron coming to within a few centimeters of the slab, but that could be dug under if the house were parked on dirt or sand.

Rachel opened her mouth to speak. The reasons for Debbie's sudden disinterest in video-school hit hard and heavy. Cybernetics had not set Debbie free, but mallhopping might. At nine years old, Debbie was studying survival, getting ready to graduate, before she got too big for the hole.

Rachel started to say, "Don't do it—it's too dangerous." Then she grabbed the skinny dark girl and cried. Huge wracking sobs. Just as the house had become Debbie's prison, Rachel had become the girl's jailor. Abram's tiny world ran on automatic. He merely had to tuck the key-cards into his zip-lock pocket and step out the door. Every time Rachel turned on the filter and faked an answer, she was keeping CPS away, silencing Debbie's scream for help. And for *what?* To be out of the pantry. To 3-V mallhop. To keep from dying. Abram had her, body and soul.

Abram came home. Video-school went back in session. Rachel sat down to take Debbie's history exam. The first question flashed on the screen:

In at least 1,000 words:
What were the Reagan-Bush years?

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Extra Credit:
Relate them to the Money Collapse of 2011.

Easy question. Go for the extra points. She sighed. Turning the filter to OFF, she keyed in. It was her finest exam, far better than any before, and done with her own keystroke. Abram was not amused.

Back to blackness. She was chained and blindfolded in the pantry, experiencing an old and familiar place for the last time. She knew it was night outside. The house was moving, back up the freeway to Concrete, through Lyman and Hamilton, past organic vegetables growing under halogen floodlights, headed for the clearcut.

Abram had not bothered to punish her. He just told her to look him in the face while he put on her blindfold. Both of them knew that he would kill her. The face she looked into had grown older. Lines were drawn tighter, wrinkles more deeply set. But the same grim intensity was there. She had called down the wrath of video-school and CPS. He had already promised death if she did that. And Abram needed a clean house to present for inspection. It would be his word against that of a brilliant but erratic nine year-old.

He would not tell her yet. He would savor that at the end. That was how he was in bed. Even when he was not hurting her, he would keep her blindfolded, touching her without warning, telling her to do things. One thing at a time. Do this. Do that. Never letting on that the next thing would be worse.

Hologram ghosts crowded the darkness. Mom. Dad. Friends. Faded afterimages of the life she had been snatched from. Rachel had erased her small hope of seeing them again. But what else *could* she have done? Debbie was so generous, so caring and trusting. The child had done her damnedest to get her out of the pantry, teaching Lilith to disable the collar, demanding help at video-school. And all the time, Debbie was sinking deeper. You didn't have to be a child prodigy to see that Abram could never safely let her leave. Rachel was more than a caregiver and a babysitter—she was Debbie's future, printed in caps and highlighted.

Sure, Debbie was smart, a midget Machiavelli, but what chance would she have in the Malls, on the run? Nine fucking years old. With security burning the cams to turn her back over to a homicidal maniac, who happened, by a stroke of sheer misfortune, to be her father. Worse sharks even than *Abram* cruised the slidewalks. Shopping for mallhoppers. The first one who spotted Debbie would hardly believe his luck.

So Rachel had sacrificed herself. Something she never, never thought she would ever do. Just to let Debbie's call for help go through. Damn, damn, *damn,* fucking Saint Silversteen! Getting herself crucified.

Not that she had much of a life to throw away.

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Oh, sure, she had things to be grateful for. Lots of things. Like the little shelf, where she put her feet when she wanted to lie down. She had been grateful whenever his assholiness let her see the sun. But most of all she had been grateful for the kids.

Memory skipped to the moment she first saw them. She had been snatched, kept in darkness, only taken out for feeding and abuse. Suddenly she was confronted with a baby, a wise little girl, and a sullen boy who hated her from the start, because she pretended to be Mom.

Oh Isaac, will you never forgive me for not being Jo Anne? I loved you too, as much as the girls, just differently.

Rachel had never planned on being much of a mother. She had meant to be a survivor. Motherhood was one hazard of mallhopping she had successfully avoided—Abram had been her introduction to the joys of sex. But the children had given her back her humanity. She had raised them, savoring every moment Abram let her have with them. How could she not be true to them?

I love you, Lily. I love you, Debbie. I love you, Isaac. Will you miss me?

The house stopped. Abram took her outside blindfolded. She felt the cool night air, and stumbled over the scarred ground of the clearcut. Not Abram's section. She knew he had another section in mind, where her body would never be found, never traced to him. Fear tightened into a clenched fist. In video-school, she had seen the terrors of the bad old twentieth century. Millions of people walking calmly into machine-gun fire, gas chambers, mass graves, because they had no choice. Now she was doing it. And Isaac was walking beside her. She recognized the boy's lighter tread. Abram was giving his son graduate training.

Abram took off her blindfold. It was near to morning. In the half-light, she saw that Isaac had the shovel. Abram held the immobilizing taser. He took the shovel and gave it to Rachel, pointing with the taser, telling her to dig.

She dug, though she knew she was digging her own grave. She wanted to throw down the shovel, to refuse this final indignity. But it didn't matter who dug the hole. What mattered was that she was going to lie there, locked in the earth, covered by a slowly growing carpet of pines.

If she stopped digging, he would kill her. As soon as she ceased being useful, Abram would discard her. And she desperately wanted to live, even if it was only long enough to dig this hole. She wanted to breathe the cool dark air, smell the young pines, feel the movement of her limbs.

There was no point in pleading. It didn't tune Abram up to hear her beg. And she was not going to add to her humiliation—not in front of Isaac. But that didn't keep her from crying. She could no longer smother the great aching lump of sadness inside her. It came out in wrenching

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sobs, mixed with her grunts of effort. Arms aching, she kept on digging, knowing that the ache was better than no feeling at all.

"Enough, Hagar."

She stopped, staring down at the dirt.

"Give me the shovel."

She got up out of the hole and handed him the shovel. He told her to turn around so he could recuff her wrists.

Rachel turned toward the dawn, hands behind her, wiping the tears off on the shoulder of her T-shirt. It was silly to cry when it did no damn good. She did not fear pain and dying. Hell, she had done that already, zillions of times—just to amuse Abram. But she was frightened of never seeing the sky again. Never feeling the fresh air. Never running or laughing. Eternal blackness. Like being blindfolded in the pantry forever.

"Stop."

The shout came from behind her. She whipped her head about, seeing surprise and anger on Abram's face. Debbie stood twenty meters away, hands dirty from digging her way out from under the apron of the house.

"Don't hurt Rachel!" she screamed.

"Damn!" Abram handed the taser to Isaac. "Watch her. I'll get Deborah." He bounded uphill.

Debbie took off like a slidewalk in overdrive, heading for the stunted pines. Rachel heard Abram calling after his daughter. Telling her that everything would be all right. Hagar wasn't hurt. No one was hurt.

Lilith came scooting out of the brush. She had worked her way around, getting as close as she could to Rachel. General Deborah of Desert Storm was clearly at work, plotting her escape and Rachel's rescue.

Isaac stopped Lilith, shoving his sister in the stomach, shouting, "No!" Lilith stumbled back, landing on her fanny.

Isaac turned to Rachel. "Hagar, get down on the ground, and spread your legs."

Rachel shook her head. "You have to uncuff me first. And call me Rachel."

He raised the taser. "Hagar, lie down."

"Uncuff me. And call me Rachel. Then I'll do it." A high voltage taser didn't scare her. Nothing did anymore.

The boy wavered, then walked around and freed her hands. "Okay, then, *Rachel*," he sneered. He still had the taser.

She lay down on the mound of earth she had raised, motioning for Lilith to come over. "I want to hold her hand, so she won't be afraid."

Holding tight to Lilith's hand, she raised her knees and spread her legs. Isaac got his pants off. Then she guided him inside her, showing him how. She could hear Abram off in the forest somewhere, still calling

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for Debbie, farther away, insisting that no one was being hurt. Rachel bet the girl wouldn't stop running until she hit the Malls.

When the boy was done, he tried to get up, but she held him with her other hand. "No, stay in me."

They lay there, pressed together by his weight and her hand. Rachel had experienced every variation of sex but one. She had never before seen the man's face. Never been able to reach up and brush his cheek. Never been able to say I love you.

"I love you, Isaac." She stroked the cheek outlined in the gray of morning. "I loved you from the first, as much as the girls, only different. You were always the oldest, the strong sullen boy, the little man. I knew you hated me, because I was not Jo Anne. But I couldn't help that. I never could."

She started to cry again, softer this time. "I didn't mean to hide the truth. I meant to tell you. When we got older. But now there is no getting older, not for me. Jo Anne wasn't your mother. She was too young. She was small and blonde, Lilith's mother, but not yours. I saw her. I helped bury her here. The night Abram brought me home."

That had been Abram's first and most effective lesson, having Hagar bury the Hagar who came before her. After that, Rachel never questioned his ruthlessness. She and he shared a terrible secret, forever separating her from the children. Abram had murdered the mother who bore Lilith, who raised Debbie and Isaac.

"She's buried here in the clearcut. There are others, too. Maybe even your real mother." Rachel could not be sure, she only knew that there were other ghosts in Abram's 3-V files. From years ago. Before her. Before Jo Anne. She let go of Isaac. The boy rocked back on his heels, half-naked, clutching the taser, crying.

He shook with a huge shudder of release, looking at Lilith, Jo Anne's true child. "Fix Rachel's collar."

Lilith's little fingers found the connections. Free of the cuffs, free of the collar, free of the truth and terror—Rachel kissed Isaac in wild abandon. Her mind whirled. For the first time in four years, she could do what she wanted. She felt a rising frenzy to live, to find Debbie, to start anew. How wonderful to know she had that power in her!

Abram's calls for Debbie trailed off. He was giving up, he'd lost her. Good, because Rachel knew right where the girl was headed—everything Debbie knew about the Malls, she'd learned from Rachel. Abram called out to Isaac, but the boy did not answer. Rachel realized Abram would be coming back.

Isaac sobbed. "Run, Rachel, run!"

She took Lilith's hand and they ran, across the clearcut and into the trees. ●

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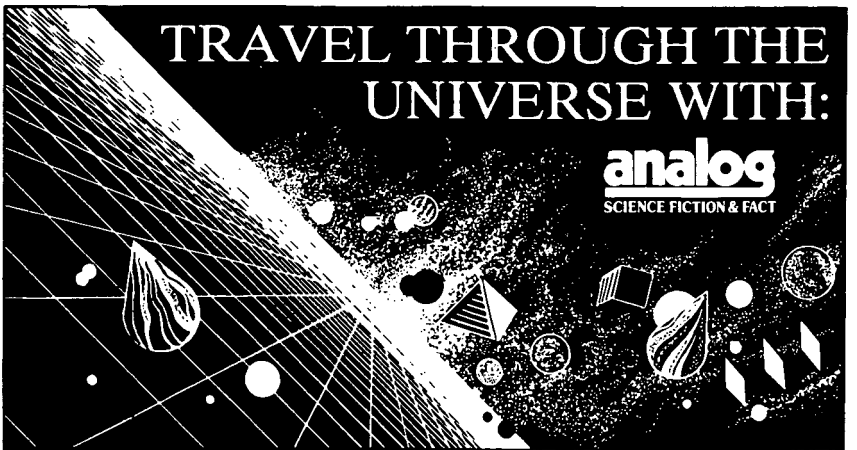

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ON BOOKS

by Baird Searles

Starship Troupers

A Company of Stars
By Christopher Stasheff
Del Rey, $19.00

I get a little antsy when writers of science fiction (or fantasy, for that matter) start dealing with the arts. As I've noted before, many of such seem to have progressed no further than *Tchaikovsky's Greatest Hits* ordered from TV or the T-shirt version of an M. C. Escher print, and blithely write about the arts in ways that would make a Philistine blush. Being an ex-Actors' Equity member who trod the boards some years back, I'm particularly sensitive when it comes to theater. Perhaps that's why I was so taken with the overall title of Christopher Stasheff's new series, "Starship Troupers," a pun so outrageous that it overrode my reservations. I tackled Book 1, *A Company of Stars*, daring Mr. Stasheff to show me that he knows something about theater. I'll say right off—he does.

The kickoff of the story is the time-honored, even hoary gimmick of the young newcomer to the city coming to the aid of an old gentleman under attack by thugs. Here the city is not London in the nineteenth century, but New York in a temporally unspecified future (which is far enough away to have interstellar travel and space colonies). The young man is on the run from college and possible paternity (down, feminists—it's a frame); the aging gentleman is a character actor who has spent his life in the theater and worked more than most actors. New York is portrayed as still having a thriving theater life.

Let me here register my only two real complaints. After decades of hearing that the theater is dying, I firmly believe it finally is doing so, and that live theater will soon be confined to tourist spectacles (*Phantom*) and quaint college revivals like madrigal festivals today. The other complaint is that Stasheff implies that NYC has gotten even meaner over the years, but as he portrays it, it's Our Town compared to even the current reality.

But those are quibbles, as the actor, Horace Burbage, takes young Rameau (who can't get a job in this electronically monitored future because he has no college degree and doesn't dare register for even a menial position) under his wing. He does so at the beginning of a particularly interesting venture; the first interstellar tour of the colonies by a professional acting company.

Stasheff has done such a neat job

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of combining the theater novel with the SF novel that I can't say which factor I liked more. Here is the reality of putting together a theater company. There's the ingenue with a mysterious past and too few credits; the minor actor with an even more mysterious past and fewer credits; and the bitch prima donna of a leading lady. It's to get rid of her as his mistress that a very rich angel is financing the tour. (Her name is Marnie Lulala, the latter being a sort of syllabic anagram of Tallulah, who, one hears, was a very different sort of lady.) Suspense is provided by the corrupt politician who is trying to close the entire live theater on moral grounds and seems particularly eager to prevent the Star Company's tour. Stasheff even knows the politically correct thing to say about the stagehands' union ("Sometimes I think the stagehands' union got started just to muzzle the directors, not to give us better pay" says one character).

The SF elements are just as much fun, beginning with the discussion of the production of *Moby Dick* using a real whale with whom the director established communication and who ended up joining Actors' Equity. And we discover with Rameau the excitement of holographic stage sets and their art and creation, and the costumes created on a Fabric-cator, not to mention the search for a starship and captain at the last minute to escape the wicked politician's injunction, just like a vaudeville company escaping the sheriff. (The starship is named "The Cotton Blossom"; a wonderful joke, never explained.)

I can see I've gone on at inordinate length about *A Company of Stars,* but it's a rarity indeed. It could also be a perfect intro to SF for that theater buff who doesn't know the field. As for me, it almost made me want to put on the red shoes again and rejoin Equity.

Magellanic Saurian

Far-Seer

By Robert J. Sawyer

Ace, $4.50 (paper)

Quick, name a novel in which appear no humans or humanoid beings whatsoever. I certainly would have to do a little reference work to come up with one, and congratulations if you did so right away. But from now on, there shouldn't be a problem, since Robert Sawyer has carried off that particular tour de force with enough distinction to keep *Far-Seer* in memory for some time.

Here we have a civilization of intelligent dinosaurs on a world (a small one of a single continent) the life forms of which are saurians of various sorts. The dinosaur culture is a single one and has developed from hunting packs, and is very quick (in the sense of intelligence) since it's on the verge of the industrial revolution, judging by all the signs. (The "far-seer" of the title is the newly invented telescope, used by only a few visionaries [pun intended]). Their culture suffered a religious revolution several centuries ago of a complex nature. Sawyer has created a nicely believable non-human society here.

The characters are a little more problematic. Sometimes they come across as ordinary humans with odd physiognomies (muzzles, dew-

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laps, and retractable claws), especially our hero, one Afsan, a likable young chap who is apprentice to the Court Astrologer of the Empress (it's a matriarchy—sort of). But Sawyer has thrown in some interesting alien psychological traits, among them a strong territorial imperative which even applies to day to day life, the details of which are very neatly worked out as everything from what passes for etiquette to the basic religious impulses.

Our hero, very much put upon for his questioning mind by his mentor, the court astrologer, must make the pilgrimage that every Quintaglio must make, a voyage far out to sea to view the Face of God. It is a vast spherical object in the sky never visible from "the Land," and the discovery of which caused the religious revolution of several centuries back. The celestial objects, thirteen moons and six planets (plus a small brilliant sun) have been classified by their behavior, but they are simply lights in the sky to the Quintaglio culture. But whammo—one look at the Face of God with his newly acquired "far-seer," and Afsan puts six and thirteen together (in fact, he's been working on the problem of celestial items for some time) and realizes that: firstly, his world is a moon circling a planet which it eternally "faces"; secondly, that the Land is not an island floating down an eternal river; thirdly, that the world is round; fourthly, that the rings around some of the planets are remains of moons and that within recorded history, earthquakes and land shifts on his world have become so frequent that permanent buildings are no longer constructred, i.e., the world is doomed.

He persuades the captain of his pilgrimage vessel (who has had a far-seer for some time and has had his religious doubts anyhow) to do a Magellan and continue on course around the world, and they reach the other side of the Land with Afsan's discoveries and forebodings. As you can imagine, all hell breaks loose.

Far-Seer is a vastly enjoyable, beautifully realized look at a very alien (but also very accessible) culture that is even charming in its own bloodthirsty, saurian, carnivorous way.

Alice in Gormenghast

Black Unicorn
By Tanith Lee
Atheneum, $14.95

There's probably nothing a creative artist finds more annoying after trying something new than to do another work and have it said, "Ah, it's good to have the old X back again." But I'm afraid I must pull that line on the prolific Tanith Lee, whose last, quite ambitious novel I found pretty heavy going, and whose latest, short book I find absolutely delightful. And, alas, I must say it's because it takes me back to the old Tanith Lee (which sounds unchivalrous—of course, chivalry these days is too often considered sexual harassment . . . but I digress. . .) Considering the lady's quite various output, I should say "the *early* Tanith Lee."

In any case, Lee's first works that really struck me were her funny duo, *Don't Bite the Sun* and *Drinking Sapphire Wine,* the latter

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featuring one of the most amusing beasties SF has ever produced. Here at last was sophisticated science fictional humor, transcending the booze-'n-broads stuff that had usually passed for comedy until then. The new *Black Unicorn* has the same quality; the results are a sort of cross between Lewis Carroll and Mervyn Peake. The film critic Terrence Rafferty recently noted that one of the primary sources of British humor was the insouciance with which people accept the incongruous and proceed as if nothing unusual were going on. Lee's current heroine, Tanaquil (an Etruscan name—don't say this column isn't educational), is a prime example—her mother is a sorceress, and the two live in a huge fortress-palace in a wasteland. The mother is so busy creating cosmic spells that she has little time for the sensible and long-suffering Tanaquil (particularly since she doesn't seem to have inherited any sorcerous abilities), and never really notices what chaos the leakage from her spells raises in the household.

A good example is the various talking animals that wander about the premises. One such, of a species called "peeve," seems singlemindedly and very verbally intent on finding bones, and starts bringing a collection to Tanaquil. These turn out to be the bones of a unicorn which Tanaquil, who is adept with her hands, puts together with extremely surprising results. The great Beast comes back to life, and through its agency Tanaquil leaves her home and goes to the nearest city. There she becomes part of the Court (which is as much of a madhouse in its own way as her home). It seems that the Unicorn is the founder and vital spirit of the city, and its revival by Tanaquil causes endless repercussions.

Despite all, however, it is the querulous and single-minded peeve who, like its predecessor in *Drinking Sapphire Wine,* steals the show, making messes and innocently devastating remarks at equally inconvenient times. This is Lee at her best.

Fanny Lingo

Futurespeak

By Roberta Rogow

Paragon House, $24.95

SF/fantasy readership is divided into two groups: a majority who simply buy books and desire a good science fiction or fantasy reading experience (whatever their standards may be) which can be called "the Readers," and a minority fringe which at times can be lunatic and at times intelligently intense about the field(s), who are "the Fans." The latter publish little magazines, attend conventions, and sometimes practice the snobbery to which every self-styled elite in any field is prone. As the sometimes luckless neophyte into active science fiction fandom has discovered, this particular group, as all such, has its own vocabulary and its own semantic snobberies. (For instance, the use of the term "sci-fi" immediately puts you below the salt.)

Roberta Rogow has compiled *Futurespeak,* an eclectic dictionary which will be of help in this particular direction, but whose major attraction, for me, is the inclusion of words and terms that SF has built

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up within the literature, like the conventions of science fictional ideas themselves. As an example of the latter, when I first began reading SF, writers would spend pages justifying faster than light travel; now so many rationales have been given for it that one need only throw in a reference to hyperspace or FTL speed, both of which Rogow includes.

In *Futurespeak,* each word or phrase is followed by a parenthetical categorization; the two above are "literary," the category which will prove most helpful to the Reader class. Aspiring Fans, of course, will find the book an invaluable tool by which to pass themselves off as knowledgeable. I regret that Rogow chose to include so many computer terms—it does not follow that being an SF reader implies being a computer lover (though admittedly much—maybe too much—computer jargon is used in SF these days). On the other hand, I was very happy to find out what a Tomato Surprise ending was (via editor George Scithers), that Jack Williamson coined the invaluable word terraforming, and to see numerous publishing terms included, an area in which many Fans and Readers are woefully ignorant.

Centenary

The Lord of the Rings
(Centenary Edition)
By J.R.R. Tolkien,
illustrated by Alan Lee
Houghton Mifflin, $60

In the nineteen forties, I was one of the few people in this country to have read *The Hobbit.* It immediately became my favorite book, displacing *Alice* and all the Oz books.

In the nineteen fifties, I was one of the few people in this country to have read *The Lord of the Rings,* being one of those to suffer the agonizing six-month wait between the release of the first and second volumes, and the second and third volumes.

In the nineteen sixties, I was one of those who felt a sudden chill of foreboding when I saw my first "Frodo lives" button. I felt that things were going to Get Out Of Hand.

They did.

We won't even mention the films, of course. But since there has now appeared a new illustrated version of *The Lord of the Rings,* I can't help but use my long years of being keen on Tolkien as an excuse to comment. Needless to say I have followed with interest the permutations of illustration to which Tolkien has been subjected. We need not comment on his own illustrations—they are, of course, perfect but, alas, limited only to *The Hobbit* in published form. I have seen many editions of the tetralogy, from the Norwegian to the Japanese (six boxed paperback oversized volumes); I can say that the oddest cover illustrations were the Dutch and the ugliest were the French.

The few illustrated editions of the trilogy were supplemented by calendar art in the worst sense of the word; particularly difficult was that period of semi-realism in which Middle-Earth was reduced to a series of waxworks from Mme. Tussaud's. The best of the published illustrations not by Tolkien

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himself were by the present Queen of Denmark (no, I'm not making this up) mainly because she primarily kept to very non-specific subjects.

The new Centenary edition of *The Lord of the Rings* is a handsome big volume with a built-in bookmark (always impressive). The illustrations are by Alan Lee. They are all in color and they are excellent. This is most surprising because Lee has not shrunk from some very specific scenes which he has realized fully realistically. I was particularly impressed with the Black Riders at the Inn at Bree, the halls of Moria, and Sam's Oliphaunt. Here is an edition that takes one back to the Golden Age, Howard Pyle period of the illustrated book; it is to treasure.

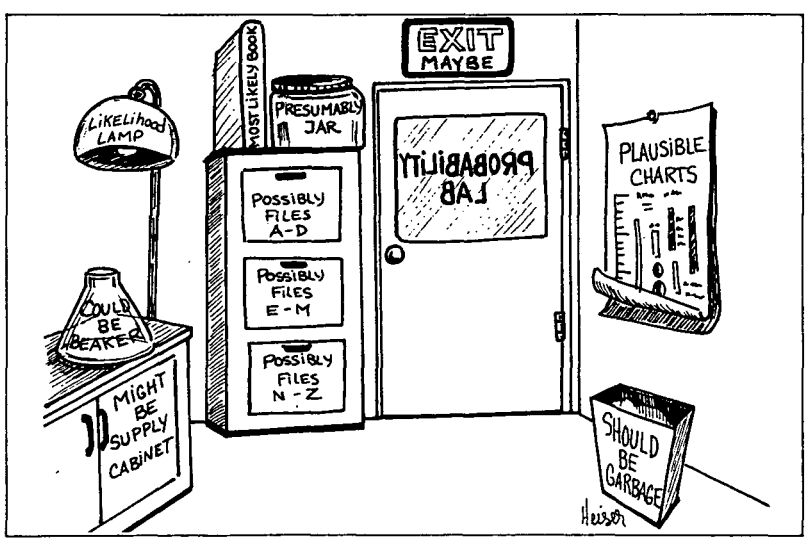
Shoptalk

Sequels, prequels, series and whatnot . . . Michael Moorcock has given us another novel of Elric, fantasy's first antihero (that's first temporally and in pride of place). It's *The Revenge of the Rose* (Ace, $17.95).

Small presses, bless 'em . . . New Life for the Dead is the name of a handsome edition of short stories and poetry by Alan Rodgers (The Wildside Press, 37 Fillmore St., Newark, NJ 07105, $27.50).

Recent publications from those associated with this magazine include: *Isaac Asimov Presents the Great SF Stories 24 (1962),* edited by Isaac Asimov and Martin H. Greenberg (DAW, $5.50, paper) . . . *Modern Classics of Science Fiction,* edited by Gardner Dozois (St. Martin's, $27.50) . . . *Halflings, Hobbits, Warrows, & Weefolk,* edited by Baird Searles and Brian Thomsen (Warner/Questar, $10.99).

Books to be considered for review in this column should be submitted to Baird Searles, 1393 Rue La Fontaine, Montréal, Québec, H2L 1T6, Canada. ●



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SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

by Erwin S. Strauss

May is packed solid, leading up to the Memorial Day finale of the Spring con(vention) season. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For a longer, later list, an explanation of cons, and a sample of SF folksongs, send me an SASE (addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at Box 3343, Fairfax VA 22038. The hot line is (703) 2SF-DAYS. If a machine answers (with a list of the weekend's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, enclose an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months ahead. Look for me behind the Filthy Pierre badge, making music.

MAY 1992

1–3—**RocKon. For info, write: Box 24285, Little Rock AR 72221.** Or phone: **(501) 370-0889 (10** AM to 10 PM, not collect). Con will be held in: Little Rock AR (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Excelsior Hotel. Guests will include: Lois McMaster Bujold, Cat Conrad, Fran Stallings.

1–3—**DeepSouthCon.** Holiday Inn Powers Ferry, Atlanta GA. Lansdale, A. Clark, C. Grant, M. Teague.

1–3—**NameThatCon. (314) 946-9147.** Airport Hilton, St. Louis MO. M. Lackey, Paul Daly, W. Tucker.

1–3—**AngliCon. (206) 745-2700.** Holiday Inn, Renton WA. British fantasy media: Dr. Who & all that.

8–10—**MisCon. (406) 728-9423.** Missoula MT. C. J. Cherryh, David Cherry. Don't confuse it with . . .

8–10—**MissCon. (601) 373-6335.** Holiday Inn North, Jackson MS. Hanson-Roberts, S. Jackson, Scott.

15–17—**Kubla Khan, 647 Devon Dr., Nashville TN 37220. (615) 832-8402.** Pohl, D. Chaffee, P. Lehr.

15–17—**Oasis, Box 940992, Maitland FL 32794. (407) 725-2383.** Altamonte Springs FL. Andre Norton.

15–17—**KeyCon, Box 3178 MPO, Winnipeg MB R3B 3A4.** T. Pratchett, K. Worley, R. Waller, M. Lackey.

15–17—**ConDuit, % Powell, 2566 Blaine Ave., Salt Lake City UT 84108. (801) 467-9517.** R. Zelazny.

15–17—**ConTraption, Box 2285, Ann Arbor MI 48106. (313) 542-0526.** The Pollotas, the Passovoys.

15–17—**AlasKon, 10928 Eagle River Rd. #228, Eagle River AK 99577. (907) 694-3313.** Academic con.

22–24—**ConQvest, Box 36212, Kansas City MO 64111.** Artist Bob Eggleton, fan "Uncle" Timmy Bolego.

22–25—**DisClave, Box 677, Washington DC 20044.** Washington Hilton. Pat Cadigan, artist Tom Canty.

22–25—**BayCon, Box 3288, San Jose CA 95156. (408) 629-4729.** Ben Bova, J. P. Hogan, Gene Wolfe.

22–25—**CostumeCon, Box 31396, Omaha NE 68131. (402) 551-9998.** Lincoln NE. SF/fantasy costuming.

22–25—**MarCon, Box 211101, Columbus OH 43221. (614) 262-7266.** Benford, Brin, O. S. Card, Niven.

SEPTEMBER 1992

3–7—**MagiCon, Box 621992, Orlando FL 32862. (407) 859-8421.** The World SF Con. $110 to 7/15/92.

SEPTEMBER 1993

2–6—**ConFrancisco, 712 Bancroft Rd. 1993, Walnut Creek CA 94598. (510) 945-1993.** SF WorldCon.

SEPTEMBER 1994

1–5—**ConAdian, Box 2430, Winnipeg MB R3C 4A7. (204) 942-3427 (fax).** Worldcon. C$85/US$75.

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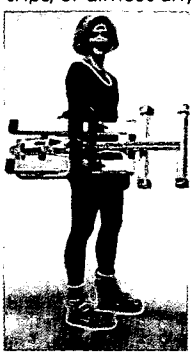

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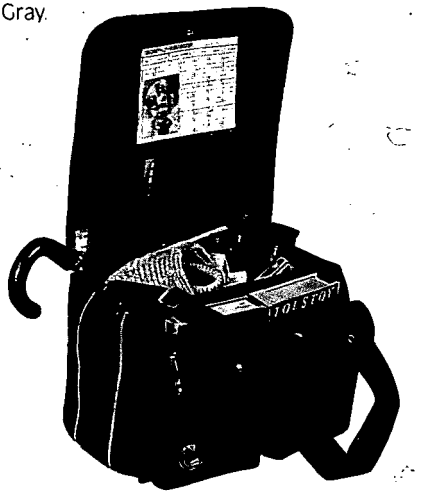

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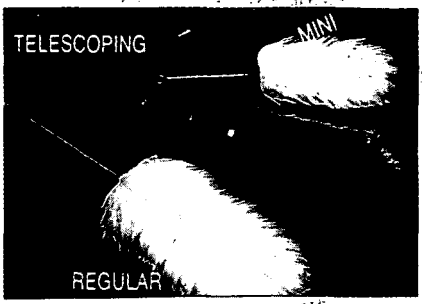

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Tired of waking up to an annoying buzz? Why not awake to a crowing rooster and time report! Our battery operated talking alarm clock announces the hour and gives the time with the push of a button. Sleek design in white with LCD readout. Takes 4 "AA" batteries (not included). 5½"x 3"x4". **$27.98** ($4.50) #A1916.

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